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ABSTRACT

The 12 essays in this book provide a variety of ways to get students engaged and inspired by the "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave" (1845). Most of the essays emphasize writing as a means for students to learn about Douglass, his times, and his legacy, as well as implications for the students themselves. Essays include: (1) "Knowledge Is Power" (Lorenzo Thomas); (2) "From the Heroic to the Personal" (Margot Fortunato Galt); (3) "Narrative of the Life of English 3B" (Marvin Hoffman); (4) "What Frederick Douglass Doing in a Place Like This?" (Douglas Day); (5) "Frederick Douglass" (Opal Palmer Adisa); (6) "Frederick Douglass and Elie Wiesel" (Peter E. Murphy); (7) "Going to See Frederick Douglass" (Martin Haber); (8) "Using Douglass' 'Narrative' as Motivation for Student Writing" (Charles Kuner); (9) "A 'Kindred' Assignment" (Joyce Dyer); (10) "Frederick Douglass" (Alfred E. Prettyman); (11) "Frederick Douglass in Newark" (Meredith Sue Willis); and (12) "Thirty-two Writing Ideas Using Douglass' 'Narrative'" (Jordan Davis; Christopher Edgar; Ron Padgett). Additional information is available from resources on Frederick Douglass along with a brief chronology of his life. (EH)

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FREDERICK DOUGLASS

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**THE TEACHERS & WRITERS
GUIDE TO
FREDERICK DOUGLASS**

THE TEACHERS & WRITERS
GUIDE TO
FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Edited by Wesley Brown

TEACHERS & WRITERS COLLABORATIVE

NEW YORK

THE TEACHERS & WRITERS GUIDE TO FREDERICK DOUGLASS

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PREFACE

by Wesley Brown

THIS BOOK EVOLVED, in part, out of discussions at Teachers & Writers Collaborative about how to repeat the success of *The Teachers & Writers Guide to Walt Whitman* with another important figure in American literary and social history. Frederick Douglass' life, like Whitman's, spans the nineteenth century, a time when America was just beginning its painful discovery of what it meant to be one nation, as well as the meaning of democracy. And if Whitman is considered the poet of democracy, Douglass might very well represent both the fulfillment of its promise and its continuing denial.

A book of personal essays dealing with the experiences of writers teaching Frederick Douglass' autobiography to a generation unfamiliar with his life seemed particularly timely, given the devaluation of reading and writing in this age of visual stimulation. Our thinking was that Douglass' story of "how a slave was made a man" and the importance of literacy to gaining his freedom might prompt visually oriented young people to look upon the written word as more worthy of their attention. We also felt that Douglass' writing could be a good springboard for imaginative writing by students, regardless of race.

The essays in this collection more than fulfilled that expectation, with a variety of writers' approaches to teaching Douglass' *Narrative*. Margot Fortunato Galt's "From the Heroic to the Personal" shows how the powerful imagery in Douglass' prose can spur elementary and secondary school students to write ballads about their own experiences of prejudice. In Marvin Hoffman's "Narrative of the Life of English 3B," high school juniors in Houston, Texas, discuss Douglass' narrative and try to turn their scrambled understanding of American history into something of more immediate significance to their own lives. Lorenzo Thomas, also in Houston, recounts how his college students are startled that Douglass "literally stole his education" by lying and subterfuge, and, like Huck Finn, was forced to do wrong by society's rules in order to do right by himself.

After reading Douglass' autobiography, seventh and eighth graders in Douglas Day's class in Manchester, California, write their own slave narratives, using themselves as main characters. In Oakland,

Opal Palmer Adisa uses a discussion about Douglass and autobiography to entice elementary school children to write stories and poems about their own lives. Peter E. Murphy and Joyce Dyer compare Douglass' slave narrative to other books with similar subject matter. Murphy's ninth grade class contrasts Douglass' story with Elie Wiesel's Holocaust memoir, *Night*. Dyer's college class reads Douglass in tandem with Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred*, whose story of time travel between the antebellum period in the South and the present gives students an opportunity to imagine themselves into a history they've never lived. Martin Haber does something similar with high school students in New York City, taking them to museums and landmarks that reflect the time in which Douglass lived.

At the Farragut Academy on Chicago's South Side, Charles Kuner uses Douglass' life as a way for teenagers to explore their own struggles with self-esteem and rebellion against unjust authority. Alfred Prettyman, who like Douglass is a native of Maryland, demonstrates to his college students how they can shape their lives, as Douglass did, by writing about them. In a Newark, New Jersey, elementary school, Meredith Sue Willis encourages children to see, like Douglass, how telling their own stories is a way to insure that what is most important to them will never be lost or forgotten. Jordan Davis, Christopher Edgar, and Ron Padgett offer teachers thirty-two writing ideas inspired by Douglass' *Narrative*. And finally, Lynda Chin offers a list of resources for teachers and students studying Douglass.

It is our hope that these essays will introduce Frederick Douglass to some and reacquaint him to others, for we believe that the presence of his life in our midst invigorates the best of who we are and what we can become.

Lorenzo Thomas

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND THE ROOTS OF LITERACY

NARRATIVE of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (1845) is a classic of American literature. It is also a work of writing that should not be known only in anthologized excerpts. Like the nineteenth-century platform speeches it is based on, Douglass' argument is meant to occupy an entire evening, engaging the reader in a symphonic swirl of logic and incident, pathos and polemic. One has to read the whole book, cover to cover, carry it around in a pocket. Misplace the slender paperback under a stack of household bills and find it again.

Poet Robert Creeley put it nicely: "Usage coheres value. Tradition is an aspect of what anyone is now thinking—not what someone once thought." Douglass' *Narrative* is a classic text because it speaks powerfully to each new reader, and has done so since 1845. In recent years I have included it as a required text in my Freshman Composition course. I use the cheapest Signet paperback edition, a straight reprinting of the original text. Because the college bookstore will not buy copies back, my students, packing or unpacking for their sophomore year, will find it again.

My students are usually amazed when, for the first time, they read Douglass's story. The *Narrative* is a well-made little book filled with eloquently recalled anecdotes, vivid perhaps because they were relatively recent in the life of the twenty-eight-year-old author, and stunning to the reader because of the horrific events they record. Following amazement is outrage. While my students see the plantation brutalities as atrocities, it is chapter 6 that really touches home. In it, Douglass describes how a kindly mistress begins to teach him to read only to have the lessons abruptly terminated by Master Hugh Auld because "it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to

read," even (or, perhaps, especially) a bright eight-year-old like Frederick.

Perceptive readers, of course, soon realize how the author has manipulated our feelings. This four-page chapter is almost equally divided between the aborted reading lessons and a grim description of the merciless corporeal punishment suffered by the slave girls next door at the hand of the demented Mrs. Hamilton. Douglass presents the two incidents with almost no transition, thereby forcing us to recognize an equation of different forms of cruelty. Those of us who are, indeed, *reading* his book know which treatment will have the more crippling effect.

Finally, college students marvel that a man sentenced to illiteracy, a man who literally stole his education, can send them to the dictionary on every other page and startle them with the beautiful logic of his phrasing.

This last reaction is the reason that I assign the book. Indeed, the appetite for knowledge is the subject of this book. Asian-American and Hispanic students, who have no reason to cultivate a present-day guilt or resentment about "the legacy of slavery," gain as much as anyone from reading Douglass' *Narrative* because the work is a narrative of self-discovery. Compared to that theme, the author's graphic account of "the gross fraud, wrong, and inhumanity of slavery" is secondary.

The three incidents that seem to be the most crucial in this book appear in chapters 6, 7, and 10 and all involve *actions* that lead young Frederick toward self-determination and, in his case, literal self-mastery. The end of the reading lessons in chapter 6 leads to a determination to learn and the acquisition of a schoolbook in chapter 7. Chapter 10, however, involves a violent confrontation with a cruel slave overseer that masks the more interesting confrontation of African traditional lore and American plantation reality.

When denied reading lessons, Douglass says, "I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom." But it was obtaining a copy of Caleb Bingham's *Columbian Orator* at age twelve that really opened this pathway to Douglass. "Seldom has a single book more profoundly shaped the life of a writer and orator," notes biographer William S. McFeely. A genuine Connecticut yankee, Caleb Bingham (1757-1817) was a pioneering figure in public education for girls and the establishment of public libraries. *The Columbian Orator*, Bingham's

1797 anthology of sermons, Fourth of July speeches, socratic dialogues, and other orations, was a popular and standard schoolbook intended by the author to "inspire the pupil with the *ardor of eloquence*, and the *love of virtue*." Reading the book, Douglass was most impressed by a piece called "Dialogue between a Master and Slave" and another he recalled as "one of [Richard Brinsley] Sheridan's mighty speeches" but which was likely Bingham's excerpt from an oration by the Irish nationalist Arthur O'Connor.

In "Dialogue between a Master and Slave" Douglass found the words that would become true in his own life: "It is impossible to make one, who has felt the value of freedom, acquiesce in being a slave." The dialogue runs only three pages but it is an impressive early anti-slavery statement. The piece that follows must have been difficult reading for young Frederick and it is doubtful that he had any grasp of its context, but the impact of the selection on his imagination can be seen throughout the pages of the *Narrative*.

In the Irish parliament on May 4, 1795, member Arthur O'Connor—in a few years to become a political prisoner—rose in favor of a bill extending civil rights to Catholics. England, he thundered, could not have "so soon forgotten the lesson they so recently learned from America, which should serve as a lasting example to nations, against employing force to subdue the spirit of a people, determined to be free!" For O'Connor, the results of the American and French revolutions were indelible. In order for despotic governments to "effect a counter revolution in the European mind," he said, "they must abolish every trace of the mariner's compass; they must consign every book to the flames; they must obliterate every vestige of the invention of the press." It is easy to see why Bingham included this excerpt in *The Columbian Orator*. His young reader in Baltimore knew as little about Ireland as about the destinations of the ships on Chesapeake Bay, but there can be no doubt that the words in the book Frederick Douglass held in his hands struck him as true.

At the same time that Southern states were imposing ever more strict prohibitions against the instruction of slaves, Bingham's anthology found an unlikely reader who took the old New England professor's lessons very seriously. "If he could say words," writes McFeely, "say them correctly, say them beautifully—Frederick could act; he could matter in the world." As the twenty-year-old Frederick learned "the art of using my mallet and irons" in Baltimore shipyards,

so he mastered language. The shipyards taught him the real (and misappropriated) value of his skilled labor and, by implication, of his clandestine letters. Douglass would conclude, in writing the *Narrative*, "to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one." Literacy is both a state of awareness and a mechanism—a *mystery* in the sense of a common craft which, of course, can be accomplished with varying degrees of excellence depending on the worker's dedication to the task.

Reading Caleb Bingham's textbook helped Douglass learn to speak in the patterns of public eloquence; and the truth of what he had to say encouraged him to—literally—"reduce to writing" what he expressed so powerfully on the anti-slavery lyceum platform. Douglass admitted his inadequate writing skills when he began his public speaking career in 1842. "Yet three years later," notes historian Benjamin Quarles, "this unschooled person had penned his autobiography. Such an achievement furnished an object lesson; it hinted at the infinite potentialities of man in whatever station of life. . . ."

Douglass' achievement supports my belief that effective writing depends simply upon one's confidence in transcribing the words one already knows how to speak. There are some grammatical rules, of course, and also some issues of propriety—or, better, appropriateness. Writing is a mechanical process; but the sense of what is or is not appropriate is based on our personal awareness. What we call education is really the patient assembling of an inventory of ways of speaking. Facility in writing is the practiced ability to transcribe one's own way(s) of speaking with accuracy. Asking students to tape record and transcribe oral history interviews is one effective approach to achieving this facility; a systematic search through the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the etymology of words often carelessly used is another. Once we can hear our own voices—and those of other people—we can also learn how to multiply our options for speaking. The value of a work such as Douglass' *Narrative* is that it is a self-defining model and record of the process—just as the word *neologism* is itself a neologism.

"The power of literacy," notes Eric J. Sundquist, "stood in contrast to the folk culture of slavery in Douglass's view less for any inherent reason than because literacy was a weapon of resistance . . . forbidden to slaves." Nevertheless, Douglass' text suggests that

there was an active culture of resistance even among slaves unable to achieve literacy. Douglass is careful to provide a footnote saying that certain superstitions belonged to "the more ignorant slaves." But when one Sandy Jenkins gives Frederick a protective talisman—an herbal root for which Jenkins claims magic potency—the *Narrative* teasingly acknowledges the possibility that there may be more than one pathway to knowledge, if not to freedom. The root is intended to prevent Frederick from being whipped and, in the fight that follows with his overseer, he defends himself. "The truth was," he writes, "that he had not whipped me at all."

This incident in chapter 10—Frederick's bloody fight with the sadistic Mr. Covey—always creates a problem in my classroom. Bright college students don't believe in the efficacy of Sandy Jenkins's African prescription for softening a slave-breaker's "obdurate heart." Even though Sterling Stuckey has demonstrated that African systems of knowledge existed in the American slave population (extending to artisanship and farming techniques that helped enrich the plantation owners), and that—as late as the 1930s—folklorist Newbell Niles Puckett found informants who identified snakeroot as one of the ingredients for avoiding a whipping, students are skeptical about the notion that Sandy Jenkins's root enables Frederick to physically defeat Covey.

Once in a while, though, a clever student will wrestle with my Afrocentric interpretation of the magic root passage. "I'm just a construction grunt," wrote Michael Menendez,

manually wrestling a living from the sweat of my brow and the strength of my back, but even I know there is no such thing as magic. Or is there? I dove back into the text in search of an answer to the mystical powers of the root.

The magic root was the catalyst Douglass needed to break the chains which locked his whole being into slavery. Yes, most definitely, there are magic roots—pencils, typewriters, and anything else that causes us to rise up through misery and despair.

No one today, not even New Age folks, will believe in the *actual* magic of a root; we prefer to place our trust in psychology, technology, and practical explanations. In his song "Superstition," Stevie Wonder used the double-voiced coding of African American irony as cleverly as Frederick Douglass ever did. "When you believe in things you don't understand," he sings, "then you suffer." But it was not enough that

Frederick Douglass understand the system of slavery; he had also to learn how to create, in himself, the power of self-definition that would enable him to defeat the system that bound him.

My purpose in assigning Douglass' *Narrative* is explicitly stated in another book I sometimes use in the same course, for the same purpose. "A book is a loaded gun," writes Ray Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451*. "Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man?" Among Bradbury's characters are a fellowship of wanderers who have memorized the classics in a future age when, going the antebellum South one better, the state has declared it a crime for any citizen to own books. The totalitarian state has, in effect, forced literate people to recreate an oral tradition for safeguarding ideas; and has reduced those that Matthew Arnold termed "the true apostles of equality" to fugitives. "They weren't at all certain," Bradbury writes, "that the things they carried in their heads might make every future dawn glow with a purer light, they were sure of nothing save that the books were on file behind their quiet eyes."

"What to the American slave," asked Frederick Douglass in an 1857 speech, "is your Fourth of July?" He challenged his Rochester, New York audience to confront the gulf between the nation's creed and its practice of slavery. Echoing the 137th Psalm, Douglass intoned, "To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacriligious irony." But Douglass knew that slavery was maintained by more than iron fetters. In chapter 11 of the *Narrative* he recalls that the only way to attain "contentment in slavery" required accepting his master's requirement of "setting aside my intellectual nature." "But in spite of him," writes Douglass, "and even in spite of myself, I continued to think, and to think about the injustice of my enslavement, and the means of escape."

It is clear that for Douglass "the means of escape" is to be understood in both a literal and a metaphoric sense. For poet Robert Hayden, Douglass' living monument is his ability to make us see that *freedom* is not an abstraction to be worried by linguists, obfuscated by philosophers, or fetishized in "the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians." The meaning of freedom, and freedom itself, must be found in the liberation of the mind, in "the lives grown out of his life, the lives / fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing." As with Ray

Bradbury's living books, this idea of freedom is an activity that we practice in our own lives.

For me, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* is an extraordinarily efficient textbook, one that would have fit neatly into Bingham's *Columbian Orator*. As it is, Douglass's book gives to students the same gift that Bingham gave to him. That gift, that ability to whet the appetite for knowledge, is precious. Our humanness depends on our determination to always find it again.

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Margot Fortunato Galt

FROM THE HEROIC TO THE PERSONAL

USING FREDERICK DOUGLASS' NARRATIVE AND MARTIN LUTHER KING'S "I HAVE A DREAM" SPEECH TO WRITE BALLADS

AS ONE OF OUR MOST stirring narratives of enslavement and freedom, Frederick Douglass' autobiography draws on many of the same dramatic and persuasive techniques as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. They both use strong contrasts to heighten moral and narrative tension, they refer to and mimic the spirituals sung by slaves, and they cite Biblical imagery and precedent to bolster their pleas for reform. Separated by more than 100 years, they speak to different situations—Douglass to slavery itself, King to the need for civil rights as a correction to slavery's aftermath of segregation and prejudice. Yet, having students read these texts in tandem suggests ways for them to investigate their own experiences with prejudice.

What follows is a ballad writing exercise for upper elementary to high school students and adults. It should take two to three days, depending on how familiar the groups are with Douglass' *Narrative*. Whenever possible, students should read the *Narrative* in full before beginning the exercise, but if time or reading ability is limited, teachers might have them read excerpts. The students could write individually, in pairs, or larger groups.

The Ballad Form

A ballad is essentially a narrative poem. Sometimes sung, sometimes spoken, its verses alternate with a chorus that can gradually change to emphasize the developments in the story. Many literature textbooks contain ballads that teachers can use as examples. Folk music provides another source of ballads (such as "Sweet Betsy from Pike,"

a ballad about the Oregon Trail) as do other compositions (Stephen Foster's "I'm Nothing But a Plain Old Soldier"). Hymns sometimes use a ballad-like form too, when the verses recount events in a narrative, and the repeating chorus proclaims general themes.

For our purposes here, the ballad is a good form: the chorus can contain the stirring phrases from a speech or story (here, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and Douglass' *Narrative*). And the verses can carry the students' own experience with discrimination based on prejudice of many kinds, from racism and sexism to agism and disabilities, looks, or religious and ethnic differences.

The sequence below involves eight steps, but you should feel free to modify the sequence.

Step One: Discuss the ballad form with students. Then, down the left side of the board, write the following scheme:

A
B
A
C
A
D
A
E

The "A" stands for the chorus, which the class will practice writing together. And the other letters stand for verses. Explain that each verse can describe something different or can tell a story from start to finish.

Traditional ballads use four-line stanzas that have rhyme and fairly regular rhythm (often iambic pentameter). For modern ballads created or collaged out of public and historical texts, however, students should feel free to bend the rules of the form, write verses and choruses of varying lengths, and forgo meter and rhyme. It's difficult to find rhymes when collaging choruses from prose works, and rhyme and regular meter sometimes lead to awkward syntax and clichéd language. At the same time, though, it's a good idea to retain the basic shape of the ballad, alternating choruses and verses, with the choruses showing some repetition.

Step Two: Read one or all of the student ballads about discrimination printed below. These ninth grade writers chose to take the assignment in their own directions, which is wonderful. In making their choruses, they did not use King's speech; they either devised their own or drew on a poem of mine about segregation in the South during the 1950s, or selected phrases from their teacher's description of a bi-racial, childhood friendship that her family tried to break up.

Poem

Blacks at the back of the bus.

I saw a little black boy
who was being made fun of.

Blacks at the back of the bus.

A person who doesn't do well
in tests was given harsh treatment
by everyone.

Blacks at the back of the bus.

A person of a different nationality
was stepped on.

Blacks at the back of the bus.

A new student in lunch couldn't
find a place to sit down.

Blacks at the back of the bus.

A person wouldn't lend a pencil
to an Asian even if his father
was president of a pencil company.

Blacks at the back of the bus.

—Rick Estrellada

I Do Not Know

I've always wondered
what it would be like
to be that black man
in the mid-age of life.

Would I feel happy
and glad?
Or tormented
and sad?

I do not know . . .

I do not know . . .

I've always wondered
what it would be like
to be that black man
in the mid-age of life.

Alive
and well, or tired
as hell.

I do not know . . .

I do not know . . .

When the days grow short,
and he is old and gray,
how does he feel
at the end of the day?

Glad to be alive,
still?
Or wish he were dead
by now?

I do not know . . .

I do not know . . .

How the kids ridiculed him
as he walked down the street,
throwing stones and rocks
all aimed at his feet.

I felt sorry for that man,
kind of glad that he's now dead,
so he can go up to heaven
where no man has to dread.

I do not know . . .

I do not know . . .

—Eric Breneman

Ballad

I was her white shadow.
We were like Siamese twins.
You don't forget your first friend.
How delicate we are as human beings.

We were just little kids playing bounce ball
4th or 5th grade, age is lost.
We didn't know it was wrong, we had all
seen it on television, prejudice.
We were just too little to know
that we were the hands with the knife cutting
Anthony because he was black and
littler than us. We didn't have to
tease him.

I was her white shadow.
We were like Siamese twins.
You don't forget your first friend.
How delicate we are as human beings.

Although we were lost
I can still see us thinking
we're big grown-ups, how
sorry I am.

How delicate we are as human beings.

—Tim Willite

Step Three: Next, the class can review key moments in Douglass' story—his becoming a house slave, his first trip to Baltimore, learning to read in the dockyards of Baltimore, the early kindness of his Baltimore mistress, her shift in attitude and behavior, his sale and degraded life as a field hand, his determination to escape, and finally his flight. Students could then read strong passages aloud while the rest listen and note down the phrases that capture their attention. From these phrases, mixed with phrases from King's speech, the class can create a chorus together. Then they can go on to write their own choruses if they wish.

Here are some of the passages from the *Narrative* (in the Penguin Classics edition, edited by Houston A. Baker, Jr.) that captured my attention for the power of their events and expression. I'll note the passage and then some memorable phrases:

Pages 57-58: Douglass' description of the spirituals

Phrases: the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with bitterest anguish

the songs of a slave represent the sorrows of his heart
every tone . . . a testimony against slavery

Pages 66-69: first experience with a cruel overseer, white society's refusal to consider slave-killing a crime

Phrases: cruel enough . . . severest punishment; artful enough . . . lowest trickery; obdurate enough . . . insensible to the voice of a reproving conscience

worth half a cent to kill a "nigger," and half a cent to bury him.

Pages 71-72: the horrible conditions of slaves

Phrases: I was kept almost naked . . . I had no bed . . . had to steal a bag . . . used to carrying corn to the mill . . . and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor.

like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush
the thought of owning a pair of trousers was great indeed

Pages 77-87: Mrs. Auld, initially unprejudiced; her change; the lot of city slaves, reading

Phrases: I was utterly astonished at her goodness

"if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him"
a vestige of decency, a sense of shame

Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me
that more valuable bread of knowledge

Reading opened my eyes to the horrible pit but to no ladder upon which to get out.

"Are ye a slave for life?"

my copy-book was the board fence, brick walk and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk

Pages 105-107: Douglass' nadir, beaten and overworked; his plea for hope as he stares out to the ships on the bay

Phrases: to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery

We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot nor too cold.

I was broken in body, soul and spirit . . . behold a man transformed into a brute

You are freedom's swift-winged angels . . . I am confined in bands of steel

Only think of it, one hundred miles straight north and I am free.

It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave. I will take to the water.

There is a better day coming.

Pages 115–116: slavery's dissipation

Phrases: to disgust slaves with freedom by plunging them into the lowest depths of dissipation

Pages 120–128: first escape attempt

Phrases: I have never loved any nor confided in any more than my fellow slaves.

to imbue their minds with the thoughts of freedom

to impress upon them the gross fraud and inhumanity of slavery

slavery . . . its robes already crimson with the blood of millions, and even now feasting itself greedily upon our flesh

prefer death to hopeless bondage

pledged ourselves afresh, in the most solemn manner . . . start in the pursuit of freedom

We were resolved to succeed or fail together.

Page 135: his master takes his wages

Phrases: I was compelled to deliver every cent of that money . . . not because he possessed the slightest shadow of right to it, but solely because he had the power to compel me

Pages 142–144: escape and first days in the North

Phrases: the thought of leaving friends was decidedly the most painful thought

a moment of the highest excitement I have ever experienced

escaped a den of hungry lions

loneliness overcame me

afraid to speak to anyone for fear of speaking to the wrong one.

Step Four: Next, the class should read aloud King's "I Have a Dream" speech, perhaps each student reading a paragraph, and continuing on through the speech a second time, if necessary, until each student has had a chance to read. This highly oral document engages us through our speaking and hearing it. Let everyone physically experience its cadences.

You may also play a taped version of Dr. King himself giving the speech or show a portion of the video (or look into the book by the same name), "Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965," which includes, among other things, the March on Washington, August 28, 1963, with short clips of Dr. King delivering the speech.

After this initial exposure to the speech, discuss with the class what themes it raises and techniques it uses that echo or parallel

Douglass'—the language of manacles and enslavement, the examples of black poverty and lives narrow in scope, the differences in the ways whites and blacks live, the appeal to spiritual guidance using metaphors of landscape (Douglass uses the sails and the waters of Chesapeake Bay), and the call to hope, action, and reform.

Then, ask the students to write down phrases that appeal to them as they read the speech aloud. The following are some of my favorites:

great beacon light of hope
seared in the withering flames of injustice
long night of their captivity
manacles of segregation and chains of discrimination
lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast sea of material prosperity
in exile in his own land
whirlwinds of the revolt
children stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity
your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution
and staggered by the winds of police brutality
unearned suffering is redemptive
when all God's children will sing together
Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York . . . the curvaceous slopes of California . . . from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee . . . from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.
I have a dream that . . . black boys and girls will join hands with white boys and girls and walk together as sisters and brothers
With this faith to stand up for freedom together
Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we're free at last.

Step Five: Now the class as a whole can work on creating a four-line chorus from Douglass' *Narrative*. This will give them practice with the technique of collaging phrases from historical documents into a contemporary poem. The class might prefer to use both Douglass and King in the chorus. One option would be to let Douglass' words describe the horror of slavery in chorus A, and King speak for the challenge and beauty of reform in chorus A-1. In this scheme, a chorus from Douglass might read like this:

The prayer and complaint of souls
kept almost naked, worked in all weathers.
Slavery as injurious to master as to slave,
its robes crimson with the blood of millions.

Notice that I altered the lines somewhat, changing "her" to "master" and "me" to "slave," in line three, generalizing Douglass' meaning.

Then the class could compose a companion chorus from King's words to work with this one. This chorus A-1 might read like this:

I have a dream that freedom will ring,
unearned suffering is redemptive.
All God's children will sing together,
Faith to stand up, a beacon light for freedom.

Note that I have joined two of King's phrases into one, lifting "beacon light" from early in the speech, and grafting it to a later phrase, "Faith to stand up for freedom together."

In a ballad with two choruses, as suggested here, the two would alternate throughout, repeating each at least once to set up the pattern, or, to take a cue from the student writers above, repeating only a line or portion of each chorus.

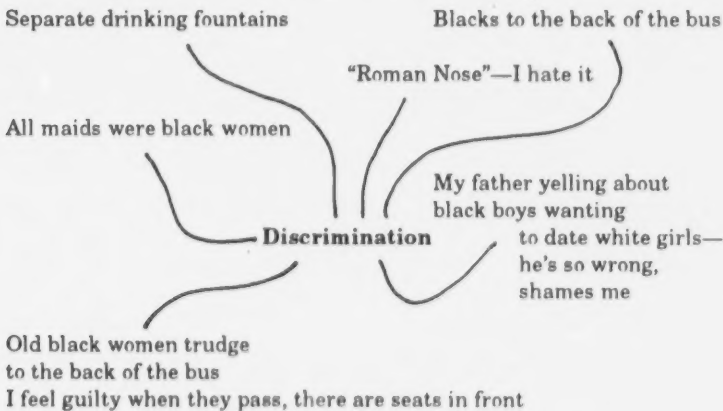
Using two choruses is only one possibility among the immense wealth of language, ideas, and events in Douglass' *Narrative* and King's speech. Students could, for example, alternate two lines of Douglass with two lines of King. They might play Douglass' examples of nineteenth-century slavery against King's twentieth-century discrimination. The choruses could, in fact, become poems in their own right, with students using only the language of these two great texts, pairing, contrasting, grafting, and rearranging. The value of such an exercise would be the students' close work with the texts, increased familiarity with their language and ideas, and a chance to use collage to make the texts deliver contemporary messages.

For example, after each verse or set of verses that describes a situation in Douglass' life, they could use a chorus crafted from the "I Have a Dream" speech. The juxtaposition of the distant and the more recent past would be particularly striking, I think, when King's words provide hope in contrast to the slave's despair or when Douglass and King voice similar determination to reach freedom and equality.

Step Six: For classes that elect to fill out a ballad with verses of personal experience, the next step entails brainstorming students' own history with prejudice, then writing verses. I begin this step with a general discussion of discrimination, including my experience growing up in the segregated South during the 1950s. Perhaps the class

contains people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. These days Latinos, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, and African-Americans may experience sharper prejudice than ethnic or religious minorities, but virtually everyone has had some experience of discrimination. Being excluded or called names seems to be part of growing up. In my junior high days, kids called me "Roman Nose" because I am Italian. By talking about the way prejudice has affected us, we can begin to integrate our experiences with those Douglass and King describe.

If large sheets of newsprint are available, give each student a sheet and have them fold it in half, then open it again. Tell them that one side will be for brainstorming a word map about their own experiences with discrimination, and the other will be for writing their ballads. I write my own word map in the board, starting by putting the word *Discrimination* in the middle, and fanning out lines or "roads" around it. Then, I call out possible categories or events that may fit students' own histories and spark them to write a memory on the map. Here is a word map I made focusing on the prejudice I experienced growing up in the South during the 1950s:



Step Seven: Now it's time to put the chorus or choruses together with verses written about events or attitudes on the word map. It is usually a good idea to begin the ballad with one version of the chorus, then a verse, then to repeat the chorus or introduce another chorus, another verse, part of the chorus and so on.

Ballads do not have to be terribly long—look at Rick Estrellada's one-line choruses, and at Tim Willite's poem of only five stanzas. The verses can function as various examples of discrimination or as a step-by-step description of a single incident. Tim's poem relates how he and friends mistreated a younger black boy. Alternating description, action, and feelings, Tim gives a strong weave to the poem and helps the reader understand the shift in time that takes place in the poem.

Line lengths and stanza lengths can also vary. The main goal in the verses is to create vivid and compressed versions of experience, or empathetic assessments of discrimination against others. The poet's job is to leave out the clutter of connecting words when they are unnecessary, and to allow leaps in time and place to show relationships and change.

Step Eight: Students may be interested in dramatizing some of the material in Douglass' *Narrative* and King's speech, alongside their own. This is a particularly powerful way to blend past and present, public and private history. In fact, students might begin each verse with a phrase from one of the two documents, and then go on to recount their own events. Or they might bring to life some of the characters mentioned in the two texts, giving them fuller, quasi-fictional moments, or focusing in closely on moments that Douglass and King skim over.

Encouraging students to study the texts closely for phrases and incidents that inspire them will, one hopes, result in more varied and individual poems within a class, and offer students lots of ways to get a better sense of the experiences of the victims of slavery and discrimination.

Marvin Hoffman

NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF ENGLISH 3B

PASSERSBY COULD EASILY have mistaken us for an advanced placement seminar. We were only twelve, seated at tables in a horseshoe configuration. The floor was carpeted, plants crowned the bookcases lining the room. All in all, it was a stereotype-busting scene for an inner-city high school with a ninety-five percent black population.

In reality we were English 3B, American Literature for Juniors. All around Houston my colleagues were battling to jettison students from their classrooms crammed with thirty-five to forty bodies, or awaiting the inevitable attrition as kids simply stopped coming to class. I was bugging my school's counselors to shake loose a few more young minds to bring my class up to the critical mass I thought necessary for a lively, energetic learning atmosphere. Many juniors had been diverted from regular English classes and assigned to special preparation classes for the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, designed to help them pass the dreaded state-wide skills tests in reading, writing, and math, which many of them had failed in their sophomore year. In fact, some of my charmed circle of students had also stumbled over one part of the TAAS or another. Why they had landed in my class anyway was a sacred mystery understood only by the holy counselors. But these eleven were a diverse, interesting lot.

There were two Vietnamese cousins, Ngoc and Thai, neither in this country more than three years. Put aside your romantic notions of family cohesiveness—the cousins had no use for each other and never exchanged a word in my presence. In fact, Ngoc, painfully shy and self-conscious, hardly ever uttered a word to anyone. She greeted me with a toothy smile each morning and proceeded to bury herself in her English-Vietnamese dictionary. I cleared a wide path for her because it was obvious that she was working things out on her own.

All her assignments came in, late though they may have been, and her writing showed steady improvement.

Sometimes I had to write out the assignment instructions so that Ngoc and Thai could copy and contemplate them slowly outside of school. My heart went out to them and their tenacious efforts to crack this difficult code at the same late moment in their lives as when my mother, newly arrived from Poland, had done battle with the English language.

Ricardo and Andrew constituted my Hispanic contingent. Although they huddled to confer in Spanish from time to time, they couldn't have been more dissimilar. Andrew had been in my class of gifted students two years earlier, then had disappeared, as so many do, leaving hardly a trace beyond his crossed-out name in my roll book. Now he was back, in a reduced role as a "regular" student. A combination of family and drug problems had propelled him out of the neighborhood and into a dangerous downward spiral. He was smart, articulate, and terrified that he would be pulled back down into that drug maelstrom.

I barely knew what Ricardo's voice sounded like because he refused to read aloud or to speak in class. I think he would have been shy in any language, but self-consciousness about his accent silenced him for good. He enjoyed reading, though; his chair tilted back precariously on two legs during the precious moments of reading workshop time when we all buried ourselves in our books.

My seven black students represented the school's majority culture. Several had been in my class the year before and had lobbied the counselors to move up with me as I switched from sophomore to junior English. I welcomed the returners. They knew my style and the routine of my classroom and could help acculturate the newcomers to my strange ways. Nakia, my six-foot African queen, was a prolific writer determined to make as close to 100 in my classes as possible. There was Pandy, a girl as round and soft as her name. She had arrived in my class the previous year with an "attitude"—at once surly and smart-alecky—but the veneer had cracked early, revealing a sweet, vulnerable girl hurting from the recent loss of a much-loved father. And finally, Taishewy, our resident black militant, quick to define every issue in class as racial. She was the first to ask whether an author under discussion was black, and if the answer was no, she would drift off and lose interest. Somehow Taishewy decided, and her

classmates concurred, that since I was Jewish I wasn't white and was exempt from their complaints about white folks. La Shantrea was a late addition to this trio. She hadn't been with us the previous year, but she fit right in with the group and proved herself a consummate poet before year's end.

Jeffrey was almost the caricature of a budding queen. Early on he announced his plans to become a hairdresser. In fact he was already "doing" hair for lady friends on the weekends. Jeffrey catted with the girls before and after class, postured, batted his lashes and generally assumed a "fuck you" stance toward the macho, homophobic world that is our school. Somehow he got away with it. The others adopted him as a sort of amusing, unthreatening mascot.

Rodney was our class athlete. He was tall, wiry, not entirely formed, a second stringer on the basketball team awaiting his starting shot next year. His sunny grin accompanied some quick and perceptive responses to our reading and class discussions. His buddy Kelvin was equally smart. Tall, light-skinned, handsome, he always hung outside the classroom at his girlfriend's locker until the last possible moment. He was relentlessly, unashamedly monogamous, willing to read aloud the proficiently written love poems to his girl after our journal writing sessions. Like so many of his peers, Kelvin, despite his intellectual gifts, was unaccustomed to being held to any expectations. He rarely did the homework assignments, smiling sheepishly as I circled the room picking up the papers of more diligent classmates.

Kelvin's moment of glory had come earlier in the semester after we had finished reading August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Fences*. As an extra credit project, he, Rodney, Nakia, and Taishevy had come home with me to perform before the video camera in my backyard several scenes from the play, which they had memorized. The results were so gratifying that, back in the classroom, we watched the tapes over and over, reliving the cast's triumphs for their admiring, envious classmates.

Several summers earlier I had attended an NEH-sponsored summer course for teachers on increasing the use of "minority" texts in the high school English curriculum. Among the books we studied was *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. I had read it before, but a closer look revealed a richness that I wanted to share with my students.

This tiny class of juniors seemed like a promising testing ground. I unearthed a dozen battered copies of the book from the chaotic supply closet of a colleague and distributed them to the class. But before we began, I knew we had to set some historical context for what we were about to read. I gave them a blank time-line and asked the students to locate on it a series of events—Columbus's landing in America, the arrival of the first slaves, the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the death of Martin Luther King. I was poised for every conceivable response, having long ago discovered that most students—white, black, Hispanic, Asian—live in an ahistorical universe. The events that unfold for educated adults in clear, sequential order exist as an undifferentiated rubble heap for my students. The Civil War was fought in some indeterminate century between the North and the Germans, as I was once informed by a (white) student. It is a common belief that slavery existed up until the time of Martin Luther King. So a little groundwork was necessary to locate Douglass' life among the tall trees of war, emancipation, etc.

I had learned from our work on *Fences* that the more we could read together in class the greater our chances of success. Reading assigned at home would be done by some but not others, crippling the possibility for any serious discussion in class and leaving me in a constant state of peevishness and irritability, which inevitably led to an unproductive round of sermonizing and moralizing. Even the students who were diligent enough to tackle the reading at home fell victim to their Swiss-cheese vocabularies, beset by so many gaps that the meaning of what they were reading appeared only dimly, like an object on the far bank of a misty river.

So we read much of the book aloud in class, either as a whole or in small groups. This made the going slow. It probably took us two months to complete the book. Sometimes we read round-robin fashion, the way students must have in the old one-room schoolhouses.

When we read this way, we stopped often to puzzle over new vocabulary, to make sure people were understanding Douglass' elevated rhetoric, and to trade personal experiences that related to the text. ("Did you ever get treated by an adult in ways that made you want to slug him?")

Sometimes I assigned short sections to be read at home. About fifty percent compliance was the norm, and then we were stuck filling in the gaps for the malingerers so they wouldn't be completely

lost. I read aloud some particularly dramatic or difficult passages and had the students follow along in their texts, so they were taking the words in on two different channels.

The most successful reading strategy was a kind of jigsaw approach. I divided the kids into four groups. Each group read a different chapter aloud to each other. Then the groups were reconstituted, with each chapter represented in each of the new configurations, and the representatives charged with educating their colleagues on the events of their chapter, in chronological order. Everyone was responsible for helping their groupmates pass a quiz on all four chapters.

My natural inclination is to cram as much reading as possible into a semester, frantic that if the kids don't read it in my class, they'll never read it. But I've become more accepting of the dictum that "less is more," that a concentrated look at a smaller body of material leaves more intellectual residue with students than the superficial, hasty brush with books that is their more common experience. We worked on Frederick Douglass about two or three days a week. On other days we were writing in our journals while we listened to music and putting together a class anthology made up of personal writing about neighborhood, family, and memory. One day a week was reading workshop during which the kids happily buried themselves in reading books of their own choosing—reading they would never do at home. Sometimes I read aloud to them, poetry and short stories. It was what my elementary school colleagues like to call a whole language approach—surrounding kids with written and oral language of as many kinds as possible.

The discussions around the book were stop and start. Sometimes I would show up with what I thought was a provocative question and then pull teeth for a few minutes to elicit some response. Sometimes the discussion percolated up out of the reading as I sensed a stir of interest during the oral reading. I would have preferred a greater proportion of discussion to reading, even though that would have slowed the pace even further, but there's a paradox I haven't puzzled out, among many black kids in particular. As we've heard *ad nauseam*, they come out of a very rich oral culture, but at the same time many have very little experience with discussion and exploration of ideas. Their oral tradition seems to be more performance than exchange. Such exchanges as there are consist, in large measure, of

insult and put-down, which is also a form of performance. The idea of listening to someone else's ideas and responding in like fashion doesn't come easy. I'm reminded of some young teachers I know who went off to teach in Poland, where it was a revolutionary concept to have kids speak one at a time, rather than all at once. Something of the same kind was at work in my classroom.

I do know from our discussions that the students were genuinely outraged by the cruelty of some of Douglass' slave masters, inspired by his tenacious desire to learn to read—which they compared to Malcolm X's study of the dictionary in prison—and filled with vicarious pride when Douglass fought back against his overseer and eventually engineered his escape. They will remember those moments long after they have forgotten the half-read selections from textbooks in their other classes. Douglass' hunger for knowledge and freedom spoke to all of them—not just Taishewy, but Ngoc and Ricardo as well.

It's often hard to tell what students are moved by, what penetrates that cultivated facade of cool indifference. The text offered ample opportunity for Taishewy's predictable tirades against the white man, but it was less predictable that Pandey, a master (mistress?) of cool showed up in class one day with a plaque she had plucked from the wall at home. It was a portrait of Frederick Douglass, accompanied by an excerpt from his writing. I'm sure she had never "seen" this adornment before, but our class reading had made figure what was previously only ground. She was visibly impressed that in her own house there existed a proud black history that she had not noticed before.

Although I've been working hard at incorporating material into my curriculum in which the newly emerging groups of Asian and Hispanic students can see themselves, the reading is still heavily weighted towards the majority black population of the school. It's the material I'm most familiar with and, thank God, it has proliferated in the years since I began teaching. It's hard to tell what the non-black kids make of it sometimes. Andrew, the more articulate of my Hispanic students, expressed great reverence for Douglass in the most admirably universal terms that transcended race. The Vietnamese girls, whose entire experience in the U.S. was framed by their black surroundings, simply assumed that what they were learning

and seeing was American in a larger sense, not the product of a minority culture. For them, I suspect, Frederick Douglass was an American hero like George Washington and in that sense, weren't they closer to the ideal vision of America than most of the rest of us?

Along the way, I gave quizzes that were, for the most part, mundane efforts to check out the students' comprehension and attention. They were not intended to tap what today's jargon calls "higher order thinking skills." The culminating projects called for more synthesis by the students, pulling together what they had learned in a new, unfamiliar format. One project had the students pretend they were Douglass writing a letter to his mother. I quote the letter by Pandi Nixon below because, with all its flaws, it is an example of an ordinary work, and therefore less intimidating for other teachers than the gems that often appear in published accounts of curriculum projects.

Dear Mother,

I miss you so much. It's been hard not having you around comforting me or holding me in your arms. I know you have been praying for me because now I'm free. My journey has been rough before I became free. There have been times when I stood up and battled with my master. I didn't know I had that much guts to do so. But I just couldn't let him do me that way.

My first master's wife helped me to read and write until she was told not to. I understand that. So later on in my journey to freedom I taught myself with the help of others. There were times when I tried to help my people to escape, it didn't work. We weren't punished when we were caught but they did know how important we were. They have moved me from master. I couldn't take it any more. I work hard and hard, harder than a mechanic building his most perfect car. A lot of it hurt, but I went through with it.

Mother, I escaped because I couldn't take being switched from master to master. I also left because I hated the way they treated me, and beat me. My struggle to reach my point of freedom has been rough, but I got through them because I know that you prayed for me. I got married to this beautiful woman. She bore me three kids, two boys and a girl. Here's a picture of your grandchildren. Mother, you don't know how I wish you were here with me free. None of my masters know that I'm here. I'm facing the difficult task now. One day soon I will be meeting with my first master, Mr. Auld. I'm not afraid, just nervous. I have a lot of things running in my head. Like how I got free or how did you get your education. Enough about that, I've become a writer now. I have written a book about me and how I got free. There were things I couldn't

say because it would have got somebody in trouble. I will let everybody know that I struggled to reach my point, and they can too. This book meant to me that it's increasing my contentment, it only increased my desire to be free. That's all I had on my mind was to be free. You know what, Ma, I endured all the evils of a slave, and suffered all the care and anxiety of a free man. When I got to New York, I again changed to Frederick Johnson. At first it was Frederick Bailey, then Frederick Johnson and now Frederick Douglass. I now have to prepare me a speech that took me two years to write. Next week I have to present this speech in the colored people's meeting at New Bedford. I ask you to keep praying for me, Ma. I miss you so much. I hardly remember your face. It doesn't matter as long as you're in my heart. Someday I will come see you. Someday. I love you, mother. Hope to see you soon.

Love you,
Frederick

Douglas Day

WHAT'S FREDERICK DOUGLASS DOING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?

A dream
A wish—
wish I knew what my dreams are
waking up with a blank line in my head
waking up empty
what is a dream—
a fulfillment—
to fill empty space
why dream—
because somewhere in your life something is empty

filling blanks—
imagination
something that makes the brain and soul run wild
How do you imagine—
think
A wish—
I come up blank—
Again

what do I wish in life
What I wish
I don't need
What I have
I don't wish for
I wish I knew what a wish is
Why can't I remember a dream or a wish
Go to bed thinking of fantasy—
wake up thinking reality.
Why is what you have never enough—
Who am I really
What am I—a person—wishless.

A wish of how I will survive
on my own
not long until I have to go away—
from a place—the only place I have really known
where will I go
fear of losing touch
how will I begin again.
How do you make new starts after old stops?
A wish
I wish I knew
what the future will bring—
destiny
is it really real?

—Hillary Sjolund, eighth grade, Manchester School

Where We're Coming From

The students of Manchester School live in one of the most beautiful and isolated parts of California. Situated on the southern end of Mendocino County and bordering the Pacific Ocean, Manchester School currently serves sixty-six kids in kindergarten through eighth grade. Most of the families in this area work outdoors, logging, farming, or fishing. In the last six years Hispanic families have moved into the area and make up thirty per cent of the school's population. Native American students, from a nearby rancheria, make up about eighteen per cent of the student population. The remaining fifty-two per cent of our students are of European descent. The majority of these families came to this area before the turn of the century. No students of Asian or African descent attend our school this year.

The community of Manchester is family oriented. Several families have lived in this area for five generations or more. Local families seem to be dug in, not in any hurry to move on. Of the fourteen seventh and eighth graders that worked on this project, nine started at Manchester School in kindergarten.

Three teachers cover the teaching assignments for the nine grades at our site. For the last two years I have been responsible for the students in the fifth–eighth grades. Only the seventh and eighth graders from my class participated in this project, due to the reading level of the material. We are geographically a long way from where Frederick Douglass spent his life. Most of the students in my

class have never even been out of California. In the six years that I have taught here, only one family of African descent has attended our school.

Our isolation isn't complete. We have cable TV, newspapers, some garbage service, and access to the Internet. San Francisco is a little more than three hours south by car. Most people go to Santa Rosa, two and a half hours away, for large purchases. About ninety per cent of our students graduate from high school. About half of these enter college. Our isolation doesn't limit our intelligence, it just alters our perspective. One year I took my fourth and fifth grade students to Sacramento to see several museums and the state capitol. When asked after the trip what was their favorite part was, most of the students said "staying at the Motel 6."

A Teacher's Point of View

Because we are isolated, particularly from the South, I don't think my students interpreted the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in the same way as students from the East or the South. What my students brought to this project is a love of the land, a strong attachment to this area, and strong ties to family.

This was one of the most successful writing projects that we did last year. The students were writing for an audience above and beyond their own classroom. Anytime students write for an audience outside of school they raise their standards. In this case, the students understood that their work might be read by a publishing company.

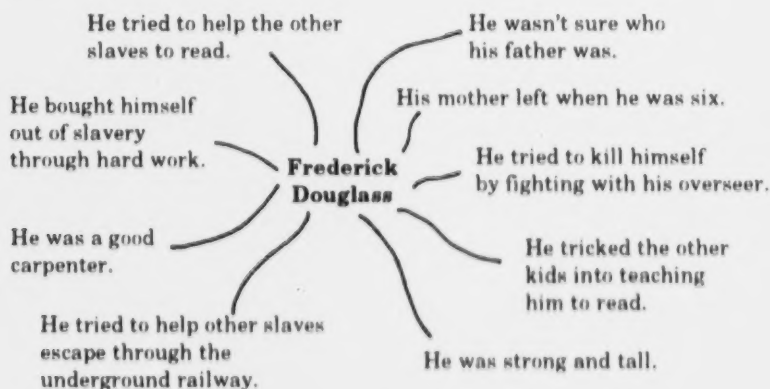
Another factor that helped the students was their experience with certain classroom technology (computers, VCRs, and video cameras) before this project began. Students also benefited from their work with the Writer's Workshop described by Nancie Atwell in her book *In the Middle*, which requires students to write and revise daily. These factors enabled the students to do most of the work on their own.

What I liked about this project is that it allowed me to facilitate instead of direct. Students not only understood the assignment, but took responsibility for a higher standard than is usually found in their work. The students will remember the story and the themes in the *Narrative* because they were allowed to create their own meaning from the story.

What We Did

I gave my students only two weeks to complete the reading of the *Narrative*, even though the vocabulary in the book was weighty. During their reading I required students to take notes summarizing what they had read. This allowed me to see if they were clear about the subject matter. In some cases I worked with individual students, either reading with them or reading to them.

I met with the students once or twice each week so we could review the text, respond to open-ended questions, and discuss each other's ideas. I suggested a set number of pages to be read each day so that when we met I could have a good idea of where everyone was in the book. When the two weeks were up the students gathered their notes and we sat down to talk about the book. First we brainstormed a list of memorable images from the book. As the students spoke I recorded their ideas on the board. I wrote them in the form of a web, similar to the one below.



From this list the students brainstormed themes that they felt were common throughout the book. Terry, Jaime, and Matt all mentioned how Douglass had to overcome enormous struggles in every part of his life. Hillary and Alyssa pointed out that Douglass had also succeeded in learning to read and write. The entire class agreed Douglass was lucky to be alive. The class decided that struggle, success, and survival were the most important themes in the book.

Struggle, Success, and Survival

I felt it was safe to leave the basic assignment open-ended as long as the students focused on the themes of struggle, survival, and success. Though we hadn't attempted a project like this before, I felt that the students were ready to try. Five students chose to make films on videotape, in two groups. Each group wrote a screenplay. Eric, Ignacio, and Jesse chose to write personal narratives, depicting the struggles and successes in their own lives. Hillary wrote a fictional autobiography using facts from her childhood. Her story was about being kidnapped by outlaws in the pioneer days. A different Jesse wrote a revised version of *Huckleberry Finn*, adding personal elements that showed his knowledge of outdoor life. Alyssa and Marlana created diaries, filled with historical research, about being sold into slavery in the time of Frederick Douglass. Matt and Kyle worked together, writing a fictional story about the life of a Los Angeles gang member.

The Benefits

Though the finished products were unique and personal, each expressed the core themes. Jesse wrote an autobiographical narrative. This story was not easy for him to write, as it included a great number of personal hardships.

I went over to my dad's house but the door was locked. I waited for him. It was about 7:30 p.m. when I went to the next door neighbor's house to ask if they had seen my dad. They said he had broke his back and he was in the hospital. I went to tell my mom but she had already found out. I stayed with a friend while my mom went to see my dad. After that I started living with my mom.

In Jesse's case, his father's accident changed his life dramatically, an event that Jesse is still struggling with today.

Kasey and Jamie made a short film about a boy who tries out for the school basketball team but didn't have the ability or family support needed to succeed. He had little or no self-esteem and his father was verbally abusive. The evil stereotypes included in this movie, which are ridiculed in modern film as unbelievable, were a reality in Douglass' life. The students wrote a five-minute screenplay and did all of the acting, filming, and editing work themselves. As fate would have it, the boy makes the team, and the father is inspired by the boy's hard work and changes his ways as well.

Matt and Kyle wrote about the themes of struggle, survival, and success in a story about Los Angeles gangs. In their story they attempted to create a contemporary parallel for the life of Douglass. Since everything these students know about gangs is media-driven, the stereotypes in their story are without redemption. In their tale a young man named Eshan is struggling with how to survive in a brutal world, a world not unlike the one in which Frederick Douglass was raised. In both stories there is a series of fights, some resulting in the deaths of loved ones. In the end Eshan moves beyond the bonds of the gangs, as Douglass escaped the bonds of slavery.

One day a kid named Eshan joined a gang named HCC. It all started when he was living with his older brother Erock. Erock was a drug dealer. Erock forced Eshan to be in the gang. It was a big decision for Eshan to make but he wanted to be cool so he joined so his brother wouldn't think he was a wimp. . . . Eshan got away but he had a bullet in his shoulder. . . . Erock and his crew went and hunted down the people who shot Eshan. Erock found them smoking rock in some alley. They rolled up and shot both of them.

If time had permitted, I would have liked Matt and Kyle to have met some gang members, in order to test out the authenticity of their story.

Alyssa and Marlana each created a character who lived during the time of Frederick Douglass. One of the students imagined a young girl who was raised free in Cuba but who became a slave, while the other's character was a black Muslim, raised a slave in the United States. Both students wrote about characters near their own age, and both did a great deal of preliminary research. Both wrote in diary form, independent of each other. Then the two girls wrote a story together, in which their two characters come together.

My name is Lorraina Martina. I am five years old. I live in El Golfo de Ana Maria, Cuba. I live with my father Pedro, my mother Gloria, and my brothers Victor and Pablo. My mother was born here and my father was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. My grandparents are due to arrive here sometime this week. . . . Today something happened that I prayed never would. The Americans came. My father says, "The slaveholders have no place in Cuba. They shouldn't be here in the first place!" . . . My father has taught my brothers and me to hide if the slaveholders come. I am very scared, even if my father tells me that everything will be alright. I know that he is scared too.

I was put on the slave market once I arrived in Florida. I have not had a chance to write since I got off the ship. They have put me in rags and I am treated no better than a dog. . . . This morning the man that bought me took myself and several other young girls to his plantation in Alabama. I must call him master and he has informed me both speaking and with his whip that I am to do exactly what he wishes.

After the characters come together in the story, Alyssa and Marlana wrote the rest of their story together.

Ignacio wrote about his own experiences by describing his family's first trip from Mexico to California.

When I moved to California it was muddy and we had to cross a river. After we crossed the river we crossed the freeway. Then we had to jump on a truck to go to a house. We passed the night at the house. The next day a man took us in a car to Los Angeles. Then at 10:00 A.M. Sunday a man brought us to Ukiah. At 1:00 the next day our Dad brought us to our new house.

In an earlier story the same student explained how scared he was during another trip along the same route. It was one calamity after another. When he read his story in front of the other students at school it was clear that several in the audience had made similar journeys from Mexico. For several of the students in our school, the escape from Mexico, across the border of California, is not unlike Douglass' escape along the Underground Railroad.

Looking Back

When the school year ended and my students moved on, I put this work aside. Looking back at it now, four months later, I notice other things. I find that these narrative projects are extremely personal. Every piece seems to be autobiographical, whether intended or not. Watching the films again, I'm not sure the students weren't just playing themselves. One in particular was so good at playing an angry student that it isn't a huge revelation that he was just playing himself. This project allowed students to vent. Students such as Jesse, who in the past had had a difficult time writing about early childhood memories, had no problem writing about their life for this project.

For me the point of this project was not to see Frederick Douglass in every aspect of every finished product, but to give the

students ways to explore the themes of struggle, survival, and success that they pulled from this book. In this type of assignment students are limited only by their own abilities and experiences. If students from another school or another area were to repeat this assignment, the results could be significantly different. First of all, the students' personal experiences might lead them to choose other themes. Next, their areas of skill might take them into different disciplines, such as dance or computer animation.

Because my students had the freedom to choose their own methods for spinning off from Douglass' *Narrative*, they were not limited by the teacher's choices. If I had said, for example, "Now that you've read this book I want you to demonstrate the following themes in the form of an opera," I would have been restricting most of my students from their areas of expertise. I would have been thrilled if even one of them had chosen to write and perform an opera, but the key concept in a project such as this one is freedom of choice.

Opal Palmer Adisa

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

THE VALUE OF MY LIFE

I USE ANY TEXT as an occasion to stimulate students to write meaningfully about their lives, their ideas, and their dreams. I believe that as an educator I must help young people to see and affirm the value of their lives, since so many young people appear confused and unsure about the future. My major objective is to use literature to stir students to write about their own lives so that they might recognize their worth and find more meaningful ways to direct their energies, the way Frederick Douglass did.

Douglass' autobiography is also an ideal text to explore with students the intersection between literature and history, and to show how a literary text such as Douglass' is grounded in a specific time. But of greater importance, Douglass' story reveals how a single person can help change the course of history. Frederick Douglass acted first for his own freedom, but then he didn't forget his fellow slaves. Instead, he raised his voice in protest against an oppressive system, thereby contributing to its demise.

Before having students read Douglass' autobiography, I would discuss the value and power of one's own personal and family history. First, have students make a family tree of living relatives, listing the oldest and youngest. Next, have students find information about their genealogy, at least three generations in the past, by collecting data from their parents. Recommend to students that they gather more than just names and birthdates. Emphasize that knowing one's genealogy is important to one's medical record as certain health issues, such as sickle-cell anemia and leukemia, are hereditary. Also, specific traits or characteristics or even their names can often be traced to a relative.

Methodology

To provide high school students with vital information about Douglass at a quick glance, without overwhelming them, and to create a

lesson for one class period, I read through Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave Written by Himself* and marked key paragraphs that I wanted the students to read and discuss. These I xeroxed, cut out, and pasted, twelve paragraphs in all, along with some key dates in Douglass' chronology.

I was a visiting writer at Oakland High School in Judy Yeager's class and at Burckhalter Elementary in Allison Henderson's and Nicole Shannon's classes. In all three classrooms I was greeted by enthusiastic students who readily responded to the lesson.

As soon as the tenth and eleventh grade students entered the classroom, I gave each the one xeroxed hand-outs and told them to read through the material silently for ten minutes. When the time was up I wrote "Biography" and "Autobiography" on the chalkboard and discussed these two forms of writing, zeroing in on some of the distinctions between them. We spent some time talking about the idea of "truth," which many students believed is the advantage of an autobiography. I mentioned how selectivity and intention in autobiography determine the presentation of "truth." I asked, "Has anyone read an autobiography?" A few students had read Malcolm X's, Maya Angelou's, or Maxine Hong Kingston's. I then asked those students who responded to summarize the impact those works had on their lives and to say what they thought was the primary lesson of each. Our discussion nicely returned me to Douglass' text. I wrote "slave narrative" and "abolition movement" on the board, then asked students to define both phrases and the relationship between them. I explained that slave narratives served as propaganda for the abolition movement. We talked about the ways a slave narrative could aid the abolition movement. I listed all of their ideas on the board, then framed this question to them:

"Why would the detailed experiences of one slave influence people's attitude about slavery?" Students offered insightful responses, foremost among which was the elevation of an individual, such as Frederick Douglass, as opposed to a generalized group identity.

At this point I turned to the hand-out I distributed at the beginning of the class and asked, "What do you learn about Douglass at a quick glance from these dates? What is the importance of the dates?" We addressed how dates serve as reference points and provide clues

to contemporaneous events. Next I asked for volunteers, each student to read one of the twelve paragraphs aloud, and told readers that after reading, they should be prepared to convey the main idea or message Douglass wants to communicate in each paragraph. I also asked them to identify the main emotion in each paragraph.

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their age as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday.

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary—a permission which they seldom get, and one that gives to him that gives it the proud name of being a kind master.

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion.

I was seldom whipped by my old master, and suffered little from anything else than hunger and cold. I suffered much from hunger, but much more from cold. In hottest summer and coldest winter, I was kept almost naked—no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a coarse tow linen shirt, reaching only to my knees. I had no bed. I must have perished with cold, but that, the coldest nights, I used to steal a bag which was used for carrying corn to the mill. I would crawl into this bag, and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor, with my head in

and feet out. My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes.

We were not regularly allowed. Our food was coarse corn meal boiled. This was called *mush*. It was put into a large wooden tray or trough, and set down upon the ground. The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush; some with oyster-shells, others with pieces of shingle, some with naked hands, and none with spoons. He that ate fastest got most; he that was strongest secured the best place; and few left the trough satisfied.

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy."

I lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. I had no regular teacher. My mistress, who had kindly commenced to instruct me, had, in compliance with the advice and direction of her husband, not only ceased to instruct, but had set her face against my being instructed by anyone else.

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent to errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge.

We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination. Silvery-headed age and sprightly youth, maids and matrons, had to undergo the same indelicate inspection. At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder.

When we got about half way to St. Michael's, while the constables having us in charge were looking ahead, Henry inquired of me what he should do with his pass. I told him to eat it with his biscuit, and own nothing; and we passed the word around, "*Own nothing*;" and "*Own nothing!*" said we all. Our confidence in each other was unshaken. We were resolved to succeed or fail together, after the calamity had befallen us as much as before. We were now prepared for anything.

In August, 1832, my master attended a Methodist camp-meeting held in the Bay-side, Talbot county, and there experienced religion. I indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane. I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves, nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty.

His answer was, he could do nothing in the case, unless some white man would come forward and testify. He could issue no warrant on my word. If I had been killed in the presence of a thousand colored people, their testimony combined would have been insufficient to have arrested one of the murderers. Master Hugh, for once, was compelled to say this state of things was too bad. Of course, it was impossible to get any white man to volunteer his testimony in my behalf, and against the white young men. Even those who may have sympathized with me were not prepared to do this. It required a degree of courage unknown to them to do so; for just at that time, the slightest manifestation of humanity toward a colored person was denounced as abolitionism, and that name subjected its bearer to frightful liabilities.

After the reading and discussion of the paragraphs, I asked, "Has anyone heard of Sojourner Truth? Like Douglass, she was a slave,

but she was also a mother and a feminist who advocated the abolition of slavery as well as suffrage for women. Think about the mood and tone of this poem of hers."

Ain't I a Woman?

That man over there say
 a woman needs to be helped into carriages
and lifted over ditches
 and to have the best place everywhere.
Nobody ever helped me into carriages
 or over mud puddles
 or give me a best place . . .

And ain't I a woman?

 Look at me
Look at my arm!
 I have plowed and planted
and gathered into barns
 and no man could head me . . .

And ain't I a woman?

 I could work as much
and eat as much as a man—
 when I could get to it—
and bear the lash as well
 and ain't I a woman?

I have born 13 children
 and seen most all sold into slavery
and when I cried out with a mother's grief
 none but Jesus heard me . . .

and ain't I a woman?

 that little man in black there say
a woman can't have as much rights as a man
 cause Christ wasn't a woman

Where did you Christ come from?

 From God and a woman!
Man had nothing to do with him!
If the first woman God ever made
was strong enough to turn the world
 upside down, all alone
together women ought to be able to turn it
 rightside up again.

"This poem is also autobiographical, as Sojourner Truth uses the personal details of her life as the basis of her argument for women's right to vote. Reflect on your life for a moment. Are there

any similarities to Douglass? What questions about your heritage do you have? What is your relationship with your parents, or any other significant relative? What are your memories of where you were born? Can you describe a plan or goal you set out to accomplish? Are there things about you that people might misunderstand or misinterpret? Quickly review the hand-out paragraphs from Douglass' autobiography and select one that speaks to you. Write a poem or a few paragraphs about your life that in some ways reflect either the subject or mood of one of Douglass' paragraphs. You might want to copy down the first line of the paragraph you choose, so I'll know which one stimulated your ideas. However, you might want to respond in general to a key sentiment from Douglass' text."

Because discussion was so absorbing, only five minutes remained in the period. I requested that students spend at least twenty minutes of quiet, reflective time doing the written assignment for homework and turn it in the next day. Below are the results from tenth and eleventh graders:

Question Quest

I'm questioning your morals, your belief and your ideals
And yet I need no answer.

Now imagine yourself standing on the planes of your limitless
imagination.

Your mind and your soul at ease.

In your life you are always questioned
and with every cause an effect. Every emotion
of yours hangs in the balance and snaps like
a rope around your neck. Imagine the people
you can change with a pencil or a voice speaking
out at a crowd. So stand up and say it and remember
Speak loud!!!

Imagine the damage you can do to a person who's as
fragile as a glass, those who hide behind a shell
and remember even stone can crack.

So how do you choose? Do you win or lose
in this game we all call life? It is your choice
so choose wisely . . .

—Seaton Brook

Untitled

Many children are being beaten physically and mentally and it disrupts their minds and it isn't right. It's morally wrong. Most kids that are abused end up in jail or crazy for killing a group of people that were innocent.

Also, many people suffer from hunger and cold. Not just only the homeless, but the starving people in Somalia and other places stricken with famine or drought. A lot of rich people take money for granted. Instead of wasting their money on a lot of silly things, they can send money to starving countries or help out the homeless get a job or something.

You should help people that are in a lower class than you.

—*Jamon Pittman*

Untitled

I think education is very important, and because my ancestors had to sneak to learn to read and write, I feel that as a young black person, it is my duty to learn everything I can and that people want to teach me. That's why I think parents are so hard on their kids.

But what makes me mad are those people who don't take advantage of what the teacher tries to teach them. I try to learn everything of whatever is being taught. I really believe that is the only way to succeed in life as a black person. Because one thing they were never able to take was our minds.

—*Janese Fraser*

About Myself

My name is My Quach. I'm the youngest in my family. I have four older brothers and sisters. I was born in Vietnam. I left my country when I was five years old. First we came to Minnesota, and then we moved to Oakland. I didn't get a chance to start pre-school. I have completed elementary and junior high. Hopefully, I will complete high school and college.

I feel that education is important. Everyone should do good and also try their best. Nobody should not take advantage of education. Some people want to go to school, but they can't. Education is important for our future.

—*My Quach*

Untitled

Even those who may have sympathized with me were not prepared . . . to do so; for just at that time, the slightest manifestation of humanity toward a colored person was denounced as abolitionism, and that name subjected its bearer to frightful liabilities.—Frederick Douglass

This sentence has a lot of meaning to me. From my point of view, Frederick Douglass was trying to say a colored person had to be very brave in order to do what he had to do. As a young lady growing up in Oakland, I have to be brave and have a straight head on my shoulders. There are a lot of people around me who are ashamed of themselves, won't speak their minds and who don't have much respect for themselves.

I have always felt pretty alone when it comes to speaking out and doing things differently. Since I'm so outspoken, with a lot of charisma, I am sometimes considered conceited. It doesn't bother me because if I wait for everyone to like me and listen to all the negative things said about me I wouldn't go anywhere in life.

I can relate to Douglass because he had to make a lot of dangerous statements and take risks by himself based on what he believed was right. I also do the same in my everyday life. If it isn't standing up for myself, it's for my friends, peers, family, etc.

No matter how many people didn't approve or dislike me because of various reasons, it won't stop me from being me.

—Stacey Reid

Untitled

Frederick Douglass knew of only where he was born, he didn't know the date or what time. He didn't know much about his family, ancestors, and his people, like me. I only know when I was born. I always wonder where my hometown is. My mom only told me that I was born in China. I always ask her, "Where in China?" but she never answers me. I want to know where it was, how the people are, what they do for a living, etc. There are so many questions, so little answers.

I once heard that I was born on a boat, but I'm not sure if that is true. (Ms. Opal Palmer Adisa talked about "truth.") I would like to know the truth about my birthplace.

—Yen Phan

"I have been often utterly astonished . . ."

When my grades have been slippin
or some boy cramps my style
instead of crying like I want
I switch on that radio dial.
The music is my escape
the refuge I create.

When the dishes aren't washed
and I need to clean my room
I don't want to crack a smile
I rather wallow in my gloom
so I turn on the radio
and crank up the volume 'cause
music is my escape
the refuge I create.

I listen to jazz, R & B and the blues
anything that suits me
and triggers my moods
I feel sorry for myself
or laugh if I choose
the music sometimes
is my only refuge.

In the paragraph it said that
slaves would use music, not as
a way to feel happy but as
a way to just feel sorry for
themselves. I sometimes do the
same thing.

—*Erika Kremp*

"I never saw my mother, to know her as such . . ."

Rising slowly he appears in the doorway
listening to his heart and the message it's sending
he sets out searching for his soulmate.
In the wind he hears her heart calling back.
A tremendous journey ahead and the fear of pain
on his return.
But such a thought is seldom.
Longing to be together
just once again.
But first the coursing pain through

his legs, his heart heavy with hurt.
Soon now he will see her
Her touch and their brief time together
so worth the endless journey
He now hears her heart slightly louder
adjusting his pack
he treks onward to her.

—Elyse Pignolet

There are several activities to engage students in before or after having them write their poems or paragraphs. One such exercise is to have them do a venn diagram (the type with overlapping areas) to clarify what feelings they have in common with Douglass and where they differ. This might also lead to a discussion on point of view. Have one half of the students pretend to be slave masters and the other half slaves. Have slaves and masters engage in conversation centered around the sentiments expressed in the paragraphs from Douglass' autobiography. This can also lead to a writing activity, in which students are challenged to think critically, and incorporate different points of view in their writing.

Another writing idea is to have students list several important dates from Douglass's life, then establish a chronology of their own lives, cautioning that they should not simply list the mundane things, but focus on specific incidents and episodes in their lives. Suggest that they write at least two sentences for each date at two-year intervals. To broaden this activity students could look up significant historical events that occurred within their lifetimes, and comment on how these events have influenced their lives.

My approach with upper elementary students was similar, except that I tried to integrate more subject areas. Also, because the students were younger and with limited skills, I gave them less information. Rather than twelve paragraphs, I selected five and simplified the chronology.

With these students, the first question I asked was, "What's one of the most important dates in someone's life?" As expected, the students responded, "Your birthday!"

"If you were to write about your life, what would you write? What is it called when someone writes about their life? Has anyone ever read an autobiography? Whose? Well, today we're going to read some

parts of Frederick Douglass' autobiography. Does everyone know who Frederick Douglass is? Let's look at some dates. When was Frederick Douglass born? How come there is no day listed? Why doesn't he know the day he was born?"

All of the students in this class, at this predominantly African American school, had learned about Frederick Douglass the previous year, and in many books for students, Frederick Douglass's birth is listed as 1817. Two students who remembered this date pointed out that the 1818 date listed in the text I used was incorrect. Also, the encyclopedia in the classroom listed Douglass' birth as 1817. I suggested that the discrepancy is an indication of the uncertainty about Douglass' birth, and that recent research indicates that 1818 is the correct year.

I used the chronological information to emphasize to students how important dates are when writing about the events in one's life: "How old was Douglass when he left the plantation where he was born? How old was he when his mother died? When he escaped slavery? When he wrote his first autobiography? When he died? What are some important dates in your life?" Several students mentioned dates related to their school experience, to moving, or to trips they took with their family.

Then I shifted gears. I wrote "incident" on the board and asked students to define the word. Next I gave them a brief overview of Countee Cullen's poem "Incident." "This poem was written many, many years ago, by one of the leading poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Has anyone heard of Harlem? Do you know where it is? Harlem is in New York City, and during the 1920s a large number of blacks moved from the South to Harlem, and lots of great artists like Countee Cullen who wrote this poem lived and worked in Harlem." At this point I selected a student to read Cullen's poem aloud.

Incident

For Eric Waltrond

Once riding in Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,

And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.

"What is the poem about? How old is the person, the speaker, in the poem? How do you think the person is feeling? What happened? How long was the boy in Baltimore? What did he do and see in Baltimore? How do you think the boy feels? How would you feel if someone called you 'out of your name'?" After listing some words that express the boy's feeling in this poem, we returned to Douglass' autobiography.

I solicited five volunteers and assigned each to read one of the five paragraphs aloud. We read through all the paragraphs, stopping only to help with pronunciation and explain the meaning of unfamiliar words. After students read the paragraphs, I told them to think of words that express Douglass' feelings in each paragraph. Students came up with: *accomplished, successful, courage, determination, love, unsure, searching, plan, frustrated, outraged, sad, angry, and freedom* for the five paragraphs respectively. With regards to the second paragraph (about Douglass' mother), I asked students to try to determine the distance from their school to another part of the city that might equal twelve miles, and to imagine walking that distance after a hard day's work.

Finally I told students to use one of the paragraphs as a point of reference and to write about their own lives, either about when and where they were born, or their relationship with their mother or any relative with whom they have a special relationship, or something they accomplished or want to accomplish, or a memory of being sad and angry, or something they are unsure about. I also encouraged the sixth grade students to incorporate in their writing one of the words from the list of identification words they came up with for each paragraph. Here are samples from sixth graders:

Life of Calvin Herring

I was born in Highland hospital at exactly 12:34 A.M. on April 14, 1984. When I was ten months I had an operation on my stomach. I was in the emergency room for about seven or eight hours.

When I was five some boys were playing fireworks in my father's greenhouse and two hours later I was in flames and that was the worst day of my father's life.

When I was ten years of age, I was going to bed, and I was running through the kitchen and I tripped over a computer cord and a drawer was open and I cut my leg. I got seventeen stitches.

—*Calvin Herring*

A Mother's Love

A mother's love is a special
token which can not ever be
broken. One of her loving tears can
open an eye and clean an ear.
Her love cannot be battered
even when it's almost shattered.
I'll never forget her love even
her lips as soft as a dove.
I'll never know how she felt
even when she pulled out
the belt. A mother's love, A mother's love
A mother's love . . .

—*Larrie Noble*

How Do You See Me?

How do you see me? Do you look at me as a little black girl living in the world day by day not knowing what's going to happen to me each step I take?

How do you see me? Do you get scared of me when I pass you walking down the street because I am different than you? Why do you walk away when I ask you a question? All I want is the answer.

How do you see me? Do you even know that I'm there? And when you pass my house in the alley why do you yell such mean things out to me?

—*Julie Jones*

Determined to Change

When I look outside I see trees. I look the other way and I see violence. When I think of myself I want to accomplish something. I want to graduate and make the world a better place for blacks and everyone else so people could learn to treat blacks like they would treat their best, best friend.

I think if everyone got along the world would be a better place. I see myself in twenty years going to college, making the world a better place.

I still see people outside with discombobulated* minds. I learn you cannot change the world, you have to change the minds.

**A spelling word for the week*

—Jasmine Perry

With the fourth graders, my presentation was similar. Before they began to write I told them that the "I" voice was important, and they should write about themselves, but think about what someone might want to learn about them. I also encouraged them to illustrate their poems or stories or to illustrate a scene from Douglass.

Untitled

I feel like I am happy just to be who I am. For many reasons, I am happy. I'm here today. I'm happy because I'm smart learning more and more every day. I have a great teacher to learn from. I'm happy because I'm cared for by a wonderful family. I'm happy because I have a home to live in. I'm happy because I'm happy.

—Veronica Webber

My Autobiography

I was born on August 21, 1985 in California. I started pre-school when I was 4 in 1989.

When I grow up I want to be an art teacher because I like to do art projects and finger-paint. Or I want to be a person who does hair because I think it would be fun. Also, maybe I could do my mother's hair or my friend's hair or my hair too!

My favorite hobbies are going to the mall, watching TV and playing jump-rope. Oh, I forgot, maybe I could do your hair too.

—Jessica Turner

About Me

I was born April 13, 1985. My grandma and grandpa thought I was special and so did my great-grandmother and my mom and dad who took me home. When I was one year old my mom and dad took me to Hawaii and I had lots of fun. My cousin Marcela and my aunty Nora came with us. My aunty is really nice. When I was four I went back to Hawaii. This time my aunty Debbi and uncle Robert came with their three kids. Me

and my cousin Rolle were playing and jumping on the bed. That's all I can remember of when I was little.

—*Alia Padaong*

All About When I Was Growing Up

I was born in California and when I was born I went to Disney World. I went to see my cousins and uncles and aunts. They all went to Disney World with me too.

My aunty Dot took me to the ice cream store when I was two, and after we came back from the ice cream store me and my cousins went swimming.

When I was three I knew how to tie my shoes and my aunts and uncles gave me two dollars each.

After I got back to California, I started going to school. When I was five I started going to Burckhalter. I've been going to Burckhalter for five years.

—*Antonio Perryman*

I see these writing exercises as introductions to the reading of Frederick Douglass' autobiography, and also as a way of engaging students and arousing their interest and desire to learn more about Douglass. It has great value in bridging the gap between history as something that happened in the distant past and students' own lives. I want students to realize that they are making history, and to think about how they themselves want to be remembered.

Peter E. Murphy

FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND ELIE WIESEL

A DIALOGUE

IN MY NINTH GRADE CLASS the neighborhoods mix. My students, who arrive from four different public school districts and a host of parochial schools, cast anxious glances at the darker or lighter skinned teenagers sitting around them. Some giggle. Some chat quietly. Most are silent.

Gradually, they learn to talk to one another. They learn to work in small groups by doing projects, solving problems, and making presentations. The most successful of these group activities has them create and then present an imaginary conversation between Frederick Douglass and Elie Wiesel. The students write a script in which the two authors discuss the meaning of the experiences they wrote about in their respective memoirs of slavery in America (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*) and the Holocaust (*Night*).

Although Douglass died a hundred years ago, his life can inform us about our own lives. And Wiesel's experience in the Holocaust is representative of millions of Jews and others whose lives were turned to ashes. Reading these books together allows students to compare and contrast the experiences of both men when they were teenagers. When students read, reflect, and consult with each other on these two primary texts, it leads them to understand the causes of racial and religious hatred and begin to think about how it has continued into the late twentieth century. I particularly want my students to discuss the similarities of the two narratives and their implications for today. This is an effective way to lead students beyond tolerance so that they learn to value the many differences among our colors and our beliefs.

Both Douglass and Wiesel describe their childhood journeys through slavery and internment, through torture and despair, to

platforms of freedom on which they launched their adult lives as writers and activists for human rights. Both chronicle the early loss of family, friends, and home. They describe in bloody detail the suffering caused by inhumane persecutors who show occasional and surprising acts of kindness. After Douglass and Wiesel were liberated, they redeemed the anguish of their childhood ordeals by writing these two eloquent and moving accounts that do not retaliate with hatred, but instead, urge us to abandon racial and religious prejudice. My students begin to comprehend this when they plan their presentations and perform them for the others in the class.

The first thing I have to do is get my students to read the books. Sometimes I have them read a chapter or section each night. If reading both books is too intimidating, I have them read selections, or I assign half the class to read Douglass while the other half reads Wiesel. Later, when I form smaller groups, I balance them with readers of each book. If the class is exceptionally mature and dependable, I assign both books. Along the way, I give a quick quiz on basic plot details to encourage their reading and to keep them honest.

I form groups of five or six students and ask them to analyze the two texts and identify their similarities and differences. I distribute a chart on which they are to write specific details from each book and place them in various categories (see figure 1). I have found that the more structure I give my students at the beginning of an assignment, the more inventive they can become while executing it. The chart helps them organize the information from the two chronicles so they can make the most sense of it. The last category, Philosophy & Implications, is the most important for this lesson because it asks students to ascertain what Douglass and Wiesel think about their experiences. It is important that the students grasp why the two young men suffered so greatly. I encourage each student to make a statement that will summarize what Douglass and Wiesel may be saying about the nature of ethnic and religious prejudice.

The students in our school speak more than thirty languages, and I usually have a wide range of Asian, black, Caucasian (many of whom are Jewish), and Hispanic young people. Once they are in small groups, the classroom gets noisy. Most like to fuss. Wars break out all over the room. I begin to nag them into submission, an underrated pedagogical technique. Gradually, some groups begin to rise above the entanglement of personalities (which other groups are bound by

Frederick Douglass & Elie Wiesel Compare/Contrast Worksheet		
	Douglass	Wiesel
Childhood & Family		
Fears & Torture		
Religion & Faith		
Reward & Punishment		
Hope & Despair		
Survival Skills		
Surprising Acts of Kindness		
Philosophy & Implications		

for quite some time) and begin to catalog the details of Douglass' and Wiesel's lives. It takes them two or three class periods to complete their charts and identify the common experiences and ideals of both writers. I encourage the groups to fill in as much information as possible, especially in the last category, Philosophy & Implications. I want them to have a reservoir of details that will flow into their presentations, to help them speculate what Douglass and Wiesel might say to one another if they were to meet today. This heart of the project eventually leads to some imaginative writing and presentations.

I distribute a sheet (see fig. 2) that outlines the assignment. Ideally, they will spend another two or three class periods discussing the texts, responding to these new questions, and preparing a script for their presentations. I tell them that they may read the scripts aloud, so they do not have to memorize them. This encourages them to put more time into composing the skits rather than abbreviating them for memory's sake.

Most groups are happy to compile a summary of atrocities that Douglass and Wiesel endured. They tend to ignore the directions to "explore the *meaning* of the experiences which Frederick Douglass and Elie Wiesel describe." I ask each group to identify cause and effect relationships based on their own lives; for example, if someone bigger and more dangerous were to attack them for no reason, what might they do themselves when they come across someone smaller or weaker? Or if their lunch money were stolen and they saw an unattended purse in an empty classroom, what would they do?

Because I want my students to understand how our lives today are, for better or worse, derived from the lives of our ancestors, I urge them to focus on the *meaning* of the experiences of Douglass and Wiesel rather than the autobiographical details. I ask them repeatedly, "What do Douglass and Wiesel have to say that has relevance to us in 1995, a hundred years after Douglass' death and fifty or so after Wiesel's liberation? What can *we* learn from their stories so that we do not initiate or support the same sorts of cruelty to our fellow humans?" These questions force the groups to discuss on a deeper level the experiences of both men. They start to talk about the causes of the bigotry that each endured and what, if anything, could be done to prevent them from occurring again. In short, these questions force the students to think, to share, and frequently to argue, though that is not my goal.

Frederick Douglass and Elie Wiesel
A Dialogue

Group Presentation

Your group is to prepare a 4–6-minute presentation which explores the meaning of the experiences which Frederick Douglass and Elie Wiesel describe in their books. Your script should do more than merely list or repeat the atrocities that each endured. It should attempt to discover and express what those experiences meant to each writer and what the implications are for us today.

You should use relevant quotations from both Douglass and Wiesel to strengthen your performance.

Some questions your group might want to respond to:

How do we think of ourselves as human beings?

Is humanity wicked with glimmers of altruism, or good with frequent bouts of evil?

What does it mean to be civilized?

Why do people hate?

How can we cure ourselves and our society of prejudice, bigotry, and racism?

Is the human race becoming better or worse?

How could slavery and the Holocaust occur unless "good people did nothing"?

Is it possible to forget? To forgive?

How is it possible for a "survivor" of either experience to enjoy a meaningful life?

Will it happen again?

Is it happening now?

What are the values and dangers of patriotism and nationalism?

Who is enslaved more, the slave or the enslaver?

How do waves of hope and despair affect the viewpoints of Douglass and Wiesel?

What do Douglass and Wiesel tell us about the nature of prejudice?

How do Douglass and Wiesel overcome the impulse to hate?

These are only some of the questions you might consider. I am sure you can think of more. The important thing to remember is to make sure you discuss the significance of the books, not just their plots. Concentrate on what the books say about the nature of what it means to be human, then, now, and in the future.

Your presentation can be imaginative and elaborate or literal and direct. However, the depth and quality of your ideas will count more than the form of how you present them.

This is an appropriate time to introduce the class to the poems of Robert Hayden, who has written about the nature of evil and how it continues to flourish. Hayden believes that the sins of the children are learned from the parents:

Night, Death, Mississippi

I

A quavering cry. Screech-owl?
Or one of them?
The old man in his reek
and gauntness laughs—

One of them, I bet—
and turns out the kitchen lamp,
limping to the porch to listen
in the windowless night.

Be there with Boy and the rest
if I was well again.
Time was. Time was.
White robes like moonlight

In the sweetgum dark.
Unbucked that one then
and him squealing bloody Jesus
as we cut it off.

Time was. A cry?
A cry all right.
He hawks and spits,
fevered by groinfire.

Have us a bottle,
Boy and me—
he's earned him a bottle—
when he gets home.

II

Then we beat them, he said,
beat them till our arms was tired
and the big old chains
messy and red.

O Jesus burning on the lily cross

Christ, it was better
than hunting bear

which don't know why
you want him dead.

O night, rawhead and bloodybones night

You kids fetch Paw
some water now so's he
can wash that blood
off him, she said.

O night betrayed by darkness not its own¹

Hayden's subtlety is effectively disturbing. He doesn't say that the old man and his family are evil; instead, he shows it through their naked thoughts and blunt actions and speech. The mother's words in the last four-line stanza terrify because they guarantee that the kids will grow up eager to carry out the crimes they see as normal. My students need to understand this terror and this threat. They need to learn that the dialogue within their groups can help prevent it.

Some groups experience a crisis because they cannot (or will not) talk about how racism afflicts us today. When it comes time to present their dialogues, however, sometimes these "paralyzed" groups make the most moving and thoughtful presentations because they have succeeded in overcoming their inertia and have become unified.

Although they need have only two characters on stage, I encourage but do not require each of the students in the group to have a talking role. I also do not collect their scripts. I evaluate the groups entirely on the presentations that they make in their four- to six-minute sketches. This allows the groups to revise right up to the moment of performance.

While I encourage the groups to make their dialogues imaginative, I also stress that the quality of the content is more important than its structure or setting. This is not to say that the presentations have to be dull. Over the years my freshmen have come up with some clever (and sometimes weird) situations to get Douglass and Wiesel talking. The settings have included talk shows, a lynching, a bus stop, parties, trials, classrooms, doctors' offices, riots, lunch counters, concerts, book signings, peace marches, and demonstrations.

I try to schedule all the presentations during the same class period, but I am not always successful. However, small miracles occur. These amorphous, gangling teenagers always startle me. They coalesce into thoughtful and imaginative teams unified by reading,

discussing, and interpreting these accounts written by and about two young people like themselves many years before. They have begun to think about the nature of bigotry, past and present.

One presentation had Douglass and Wiesel exchange stories as they reflected on their lives at the "Pearly Gates" while waiting to be processed by whatever saint was on duty that day. Another had them hovering as guardian angels who meet after witnessing an act of violence committed against an Asian girl. In another setting they and their spouses had to report to school as parents of two boys involved in a fist fight. There, they talked with their children about the need to develop tolerance and affection for one another, qualities they would need to prosper in a world with many differences.

In another scenario, the group had invented a game show called "Wheel of Terror" in which the loquacious host and lovely hostess cruelly tortured and humiliated the contestants, Douglass and Wiesel, while the audience cheered. Both contestants, however, won the game by enduring their tormentors and converting the audience to speak out against acts of intolerance.

We spend the class periods following the presentations discussing why some were more successful than others and how the weaker ones could be improved. Perhaps in the future I will videotape the performances to replay when we discuss them.

Unfortunately, many of my students believe that there is no cure for prejudice, a belief I do not share. I have found that the literature we read and discuss in class goes a long way towards accelerating the process of transformation from fear and animosity toward tolerance and, eventually, appreciation. Just about every racial, religious and ethnic group has experienced violent inequity. Bigotry thrives in all parts of our nation and the world. The miracle of Frederick Douglass and Elie Wiesel is that they did not wallow in anguish or hatred but responded to abomination by organizing their lives to prevent this kind of hatred from afflicting others. I think most of my students begin to understand this when they solve the problems of their own group dynamics and see the performances of their classmates. Perhaps they mean it when they say there is no hope. But the friendships that they begin and the camaraderie that they enjoy when they have survived this difficult assignment refute their apprehension.

Before my students leave Frederick Douglass and Elie Wiesel, I read to them Robert Hayden's sonnet about Douglass:

Frederick Douglass

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful and terrible thing, needful to man as air, usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all, when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole, reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians: this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world where none is lonely, none hunted, alien, this man, superb in love and logic, this man shall be remembered. Oh, not with statue's rhetoric, not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone, but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.²

I imagine that my students' lives are the lives Hayden has written about, that their lives have grown out of Douglass' life, that they too are in pursuit of the "beautiful and terrible thing," this freedom that we must breathe to live fully human. My wish is that they too will comprehend this and teach it to others.

Notes

1. Robert Hayden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Frederick Glaysher (New York: Liveright, 1985) p. 15.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

GOING TO SEE FREDERICK DOUGLASS

HOW DOES A HIGH SCHOOL special education teacher introduce his students to the autobiographical work of Frederick Douglass? I was starting from a *tabula rasa*, since most of my resource room students had never heard of him. Also, the students in the small, tutorial groups that I teach had various learning problems, and often could not "stay" with a written text (even one as short as the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*) long enough for a careful reading. I felt, therefore, that it would be essential to supplement passages from the book with supporting materials, and around a theme that might grab my students and hold their interest. After some of my own reading and a good deal of brainstorming, I came to the conclusion that the clearest vision of Douglass's life could best be achieved through putting his life squarely in his historical times, for his long life, from 1817 to 1895, spanned the momentous nineteenth century. But, more important than the "convenience" of his birth and death dates, as I later explained to my students, his was a life that, in its singularly heroic and singularly American vein, changed our nation.

Recreating nineteenth-century America for the imaginative grasp of late twentieth-century New York American teenagers is a daunting task; these young people are virtually *locked in* to the idiosyncrasies dictated to them by TV soundbites, the movies, and the mass-thinking of their peers and their superstar "peer-icons" in sports and entertainment. Even worse, in some cases, are the day-to-day demands of life in monolithic project-houses. On the other hand, New York City can be a convenient "stage" to escape *to* from the everyday, if you have a specific agenda or theme in mind: mine was to search out and investigate, with my students, the parts of the city that still hold the images of the past. My plan was to look at the buildings, indoor and outdoor sculptures, landmarks, and special museum exhibits that would give my students the "feel" of the century that Frederick Douglass lived in.

To prepare my students for "Frederick Douglass and His Times," the first of the two exhibits we were to see, I xeroxed and handed out the first three chapters of the *Narrative*. We had read these chapters out loud in class over a three-week period, along with excerpts from his speeches, and at the same time looked at photos from William S. McFeely's excellent biography of Douglass. In addition, I had gotten hold of the PBS video entitled "When The Lion Wrote History," which I found scholarly and thorough in its coverage of the many milestones in Douglass' "larger-than-life" life. I started my social studies/literature unit on Douglass by introducing him *through his face*, which I have always thought was incredible. I xeroxed the photos in William S. McFeely's biography that showed Douglass, from his youth to his old age, and handed them out in class. It is a face that speaks eloquently of a life fully experienced, with fierce determination, single-minded vision, intense suffering, and, finally, long-denied peace. My students, with their youthful intuitive grasp of the soul behind the person, quickly sensed this power. Looking at the formal black-and-white photographic portrait of the twenty-three-year-old Douglass, who had just escaped life as a slave and joined the American Anti-Slavery Society as a travelling speaker, one student said, "He looks like an American Indian. Are you sure he's black?" I reached for the opening lines of the *Narrative*:

"My mother was named Harriet Bailey. She was the daughter of Isaac and Betsey Bailey, both colored, and quite dark. My mother was of a darker complexion than either my grandmother or grandfather.

"My father was a white man. . . ."

"So he was *mulatto*," said another student.

"Exactly," I answered, "and this condition, as they would say in the nineteenth century, was an ingredient of his personality, and determined much about the mission he set for himself, or, as we might say in the 1990s, his 'search for selfhood.'"

I then had them compare that portrait with what was perhaps his earliest portrait, the full-faced daguerreotype of Douglass in his twenties. Comments about his "funky hairstyle" abounded, with initial giggles, but I think that these teens couldn't help but be mesmerized by the tribulation in this face that stared at them from so long ago. I asked them to write down what they saw in this man's face, and they agreed on paper with each other that they saw pain, wisdom, deep sadness, and anger. I asked them to tell if he looks

modern, or from a long time ago, and why. Most students mentioned the "funny tie," and the "stiff" pose he assumed, to prove he was from a long time ago. All along, I showed them various other portraits and pictures of Douglass: the cover page of a piece of anti-slavery sheet music ("The Fugitive's Song: Frederick Douglass, a Graduate of the Peculiar Institution"), showing Douglass, barefoot, in mid-flight, with a wooden club and a knapsack in one hand, and his finger pointing to "Freedom's Road" in the other; the softer portrait that was the frontispiece for *My Bondage and My Freedom*, his second autobiography, of 1855, when he was thirty-eight years old (just a year older than me, I told the class); and, finally, the portraits of Douglass as an older man, his white hair like a halo, his beard like that of an Old Testament prophet. I also showed him with his back to the camera, at his writing desk in Cedar Hill, and then with his second wife, and the outline of a smile, near the end of his long and prolific life. In answer to questions, I told the class that he had been married to a black woman for forty years, but when she died, he had married the white woman pictured, thus in his old age breaking down yet another barrier in the quest for racial justice. "But," I promised, "you'll learn all this in the video I'll show you. First, I want you to read a poem about Douglass, and see if it matches the man in the pictures." With that, I handed out Robert Hayden's great ode, "Frederick Douglass":

Frederick Douglass

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
this man, superb in love and logic, this man
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

After reading the poem out loud, with the dramatic tone it instinctively summoned up in me, I asked if the photos and the pictures

showed an image of "this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro / beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world / where none is lonely, none hunted, alien."

Yes, they said, they saw such a man in the face that spoke so eloquently from the portraits. And did they see a man "superb in love and logic"? And yes, they agreed, they saw this man. There was still more about him that remained to be seen, discussed, and "deciphered," so I urged them to remain as attentive as they had been. Then I asked them about the meaning of the "beautiful, terrible thing." After some discussion, I asked them to write their own poems, for homework, about anything that they found to be both beautiful and terrible at the same time. Here are two examples:

Beautiful Terrible Beautiful

They said that black was beautiful
when my mother was coming up
but they treated her terrible
in this white man's world
They said that white was beautiful
when the slaves were still around
but they were really terrible
thank God it's no longer a white man's world!

—Stephanie P.

Beautiful and Terrible

Homework is beautiful and terrible

because it makes me think
and it makes me get my work done
that is beautiful
but it is also terrible
because I am missing
the Knicks and the Nets
on TV

—Jacqui M.

After we read these and other poems aloud and discussed them, it was time to move on. I had two weeks to go before our scheduled trip to Gallery 1199 to see the Douglass exhibition, and this was the second week of the three-week unit on Douglass that I designed to prep the group for the culminating class trip. I explained that the

title of the video I was going to show them, "When The Lion Wrote History," is taken from the letter (included in the Penguin Classic copy of the *Narrative*) to Frederick Douglass by the orator and abolitionist Wendell Phillips, which praised the just-published narrative. The excerpt I shared with them reads:

My Dear Friend: You remember the old fable of "The Man and the Lion" where the lion complained that he should not be so misrepresented "when the lions wrote history." I am glad the time has come "when the lions write history." We have been left long to gather the character of slavery from the involuntary evidence of the masters.

Phillips, I told the group, was making a crucial point: that Douglass, as a man who had experienced the horrors of slavery first-hand, was the author of what was destined to become "the pre-eminent American slave narrative." Douglass autobiography, I explained, was so popular that it defined a relatively new kind of American literature, many examples of which were published between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the Civil War. *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* reveals the pattern common to all these slave narratives: it was written by an ex-slave, it recounts the narrator's experiences in slavery, his heroic journey "from slavery to freedom," and his subsequent dedication to abolitionist principles and goals. "So," one girl conveniently asked me, "why is this one so important, why is this one the best?" The reason, I said, is that Douglass believed in and acted on his role in history to such an extent that his very life became a chronicle of his times, the nineteenth century, and the black struggle for freedom that helped change the country in that trying time.

Then I asked them if they had heard the word *destiny*, and they said that they had heard the word, but only had a vague understanding of its meaning. After having them look up the word, I went on to point out that Douglass acted on a faith in his individual destiny. And, although he had rejected the Christian religion as it was preached and practiced in church and discussion groups among the slaves, he had had a classic nineteenth-century experience of touched-by-God conversion himself as a youth; and had even sought to convert his master Thomas Auld at a tent revival. Apart from this, I told the students, Douglass did, like many in his day, hold on to a belief in a divine Providence that he alluded to, again and again,

not only in his autobiography but in his speeches, other writings, and letters.

I asked the class if they could think of other famous freedom fighters who believed in their having been chosen for their mission, and the names of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X came up immediately. I took the opportunity to add Douglass' white contemporary John Brown, who believed he had been chosen, like a warrior-prophet of the Old Testament, to lead his (black) brethren out of bondage, and I went on to explain how Douglass had been invited by Brown to take part in the ill-fated attack on Harper's Ferry, but, because he knew it to be a poorly planned "suicide mission" (and because his radicalism took the alternative road, at least at that moment, of legal agitation) Douglass declined. Here I quoted the famous words between Brown and Douglass:

"Come with me Douglass; I will defend you with my life; I want you for a special purpose. When I strike, the bees will begin to swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them."

To which Douglass answered:

"Alas, I must go to my work as you to yours."

Finally, after more discussion, I showed the PBS video. I asked them to pay close attention to any scenes or statements that made them think of the "Call from Providence" in Douglass' thought and deed.

After the viewing, I asked my students one of the questions from the PBS teacher's guide: "Why were people captivated by Frederick Douglass?" I had arranged my students into three small groups, and asked them to make a list of skills needed to be a persuasive orator. The answers they wrote included "good looks, a loud voice, good diction, dramatic gestures, and a dynamic reputation." We all agreed that Douglass had all of these.

I reminded them that Douglass lived in a day and age when the spoken word was greatly valued, and that, before he was "forced" by pro-slavery propagandists to write down his story, he became internationally famous as an orator. As McFeely says, "the resonance of his voice characterized one of the great instruments of the nineteenth century."

Next, I read them McFeely's description of the reaction to Douglass' first important speech, on Nantucket Island, in 1841:

With intense concentration, these New Englanders heard Frederick telling them about his life. It was the story of a run-away slave, yes, but it was *his* story. He was telling it, he was *calling himself into being* (emphasis mine). . . . As he sat there in the Big Shop, he knew a triumph so intense, so total, that he would spend his entire life seeking to sustain it.

And so, I told the group, in line with his belief in divine intervention, and in a typically nineteenth-century way, *his true vocation had grasped him*.

At long last, we went, well prepared by our reading and our viewing and our talking and writing, to see an exhibition of Stephen Alcorn's woodcuts, "The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass," at the union gallery space, Gallery 1199 in Manhattan. These woodcuts, we all felt, jumped off the walls, and had, as the artist had intended, a hallucinatory and mysterious quality to them (see figure 3). There were images here, bursting with color, of Lincoln, Walt Whitman, and Susan B. Anthony, as well as Brown and Douglass, all in mandala-esque patterns. The Douglass portraits showed him aging, but with the spiritual fire in his face burning brighter and brighter; it complimented our earlier work with his portraits quite nicely.

From the gallery, we went crosstown to the Pierpont Morgan Library to see its exhibit entitled "I Believe In Agitation / Frederick Douglass, 1817-1895." On view was a selection of letters being shown to commemorate the centenary of Douglass' death. The students were "overdosing" on explanatory statements from me by this point, but the careful, bold, handwritten letters, in terms of their antiquated look as much as their content, drove home the points we had been discussing in class. One passage, beautifully mounted near a photo of the author as a young man, summed up what we came to understand as a kind of motto for "our" Douglass:

So long as my voice can be heard on this or the other side of the Atlantic, I will hold up America to the lightning scorn of moral indignation. In doing this, I shall feel myself discharging the duty of a true patriot; for he is a lover of his country who rebukes and does not excuse its sins.

In the end, I was given rave reviews by my students for this undertaking. I reminded them that it was their inquisitiveness, their work, that had made this a successful venture. The most important thing was to come away from our shared experience knowing that we



Figure 3. Portrait of Frederick Douglass by Stephen Alcorn. Reproductions of one of Alcorn's portraits of Douglass are available for purchase. See the Douglass Resources section for information.

too are living in and through American history, and can look back to men like Douglass for the right way forward. As we rode back to Brooklyn on the subway, I could see that my students had absorbed more in this one field trip than they had in a long time within school walls. I knew this for sure when more than one asked, "Hey, Mr. Haber, who are we visiting next?"

Charles Kuner

USING DOUGLASS' NARRATIVE AS MOTIVATION FOR STUDENT WRITING

I HAVE FOUND that one of the most successful pieces of literature for motivating students to read and write is the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. It opens up so many issues of adolescence, such as self-esteem, identity, rebellion against unjust authority and laws, individual dignity, and control over one's life and working conditions. Add to this a poetic writing style, and one readily understands why students become absorbed in the *Narrative*.

Farragut Career Academy, where I have taught since 1965, is located in the inner city on Chicago's Southwest side. Our students are Hispanic (eighty-five per cent) and African-American (fifteen per cent). A large portion of them are on public aid and below grade level. Much of their energy is expended in a day-to-day struggle against gang-bangers and other social ills.

I use the *Narrative* in my American history and ethnic studies courses. Students in these classes are upperclassmen.

What makes it easier for me to teach the *Narrative* is my admiration for Douglass. Indeed, he's one of my personal heroes. Besides the *Narrative*, I've read the two later autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, as well as other material, such as the recent biography by William McFeely. So in teaching the *Narrative*, I can give my classes a rich background on the historical period and on the man.

Many students are not aware of Douglass; others may have only a vague recollection of hearing about him in history class. Before we begin reading the book, I give some background information on his

period and on slavery. In addition, I show a documentary movie—unfortunately out of print—on the life of Douglass entitled *House on Cedar Hill*.

I should say, in all honesty, that students do struggle with the book, due to low reading levels, lack of experience in reading and discussing literature, and problems with English as a second language. These difficulties arise in the writing assignments as well. One way of dealing with these problems is to have the students make a little book of notes for each chapter. They make a title page and label the subsequent pages by chapter. Each chapter page contains important points for that chapter as it's summarized in class discussion.

Also, I go through most of the chapters with the class, reading certain excerpts orally, asking questions, and making connections with the current situation in our society. There will be two or three key chapters that students will read very carefully, using guide questions for class discussion. Bilingual help is given by some of my students who act as tutors for those who are limited in English proficiency.

Until they read the *Narrative*, most of my students are unaware of how inhumane slavery was. Some become visibly angry about what they learn. I attempt to channel that anger into constructive actions that they can take for themselves and others, using Douglass as their role model. For instance, I show them that they can have better control of their destiny by empowering themselves with better literacy skills.

Moreover, I point out that Douglass exemplified self-respect, strong moral character, aggressiveness, courage, intelligence, and a deep sense of racial pride and responsibility. For Douglass, struggle was more important than compromise, dedication to the freedom of his people more important than his own safety. He felt responsible for secretly educating his fellow slaves, and for helping them escape from their bondage. The message to students: fight against prejudice using reason, using literacy skills. Don't enslave yourselves with voluntary ignorance, drugs, gangs, or early teenage pregnancy. Help others as you have been helped.

While reading the *Narrative*, the students keep journals. Not surprisingly, I get many moving entries inspired by certain sections of the book. In the early part of the *Narrative*, Douglass writes about the significance of the spirituals sung in the fields by the slaves. One

class heard recordings of some of these "sorrow songs" and one of our music teachers gave a special presentation showing the link between spirituals, blues, and gospel music. One Hispanic student who's not afraid to cross racial boundaries has some close African-American friends. One of these friends invited him to attend a church service. For the young Hispanic it was a beautiful spiritual revelation. He wrote, "Believe me there's nothing like a black church service! It cannot be copied! The preacher preaches up a storm and gets reactions from the congregation. Then there would be the singing of the church choir. That church would rock. One could feel welling up within oneself a sense of love—a sense of faith—a sense of unity—a sense of hope."

Douglass' two-hour fight with the "slave breaker" Edward Covey elicited another student's comment: "I envy Douglass' courage in fighting Edward Covey and to escape his master. Never have I heard a story like this—the way he conquered his problems."

In the first chapter, Douglass relates how he hardly knew his mother, and that when she died, it was as if a stranger died. That led to this poignant journal entry: "I'm really sorry about Douglass' family that he lost or never saw. I know how Douglass feels because I never saw my mother because we got separated just like Douglass did."

What we have here are prime examples of how a powerful poetic writing style helped these Hispanic students identify with an intelligent, courageous black slave and, thereby, narrowed some cultural and ethnic gaps.

Another writing activity I have the class do involves elements of a "twilight zone" experience. Students are to pretend it's 1845 and to write a letter to Douglass indicating their reactions and feelings to his *Narrative*. But within the letter they will crisscross between the past and present.

The format for the letter is as follows. In the first paragraph they introduce themselves and write about three scenes that horrified them. The second paragraph contains examples of courage and intelligence shown by Douglass. In the third paragraph, students request advice from Douglass and describe the racial tensions at Farragut. Then students suggest, in the fourth paragraph, two things they would do to reduce these problems and, in a final paragraph, they may say whatever they wish.

Students have no problem in straddling the timelines and usually enjoy doing the assignment. However, for those who wish an alternative assignment, I offer the essay topic: "If Frederick Douglass were alive today, what message would he bring to Farragut Career Academy students about improving racial relations?"

Another activity involves the use of large white posterboards. Small groups of students complete a posterboard book report on the *Narrative* by doing what I call story mapping. In the middle of the board goes the title, author, and publisher.

On the left and right sides of each board there are sections for a character map of one of the protagonists, new vocabulary words, setting, plot, a symbol that students invent that represents the story, and three completed sentences about the book. At the bottom of the board, the theme or message is stated and explained. Students can be as creative as possible in putting this together, including the use of drawings and pictures. Students love working in groups and doing this kind of writing assignment. In past years, I've gotten some extremely well-done posterboard story maps that have been displayed in the classroom as well as schoolwide.

Finally, since the students have been writing about Douglass' story, I ask them to write their own stories, which students really like to do once they get over their initial reluctance or perception that their lives are dull. Realistically, how often does any authority figure ask them to write about their own souls and to make themselves the topic of a written school assignment? It gives the students a sense of personal importance, the type of empowerment discussed in the *Narrative* when Douglass relates how he secretly learned to read and write, and how that changed him from a non-thinking slave to a thinking man who became resurrected, if you will. When the students complete their autobiographies and see them displayed in the room, it gives a needed boost to their vulnerable self-images.

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass is an invaluable and powerful autobiography that not only inspires students to write, but also teaches them that people can transcend group distinctions, whether racial, ethnic, class, or gender. It also shows them the link between literacy and personal empowerment, that they, too, can overcome personal obstacles and become the masters of their own fates.

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Joyce Dyer

A KINDRED ASSIGNMENT

I HAVE PAGES OF ASSIGNMENTS that have grown out of classroom discussions about Frederick Douglass and his *Narrative*. Literally pages. I very much doubt that this sets me apart from anyone else who has taught this rich text more than once. There are many avenues to enter by. There are simple assignments that test reading and help students get organized: comparisons of one sort or another, discussions about education, about religious hypocrisy, about Douglass' graceful and talented style. And there are more difficult assignments that force students to abandon firm ground and wade in troubling waters. Like this one: "Study the complex and disturbing side of Frederick Douglass—his guilt, paradoxical faith, existential doubt, and Freudian despair." That brings sweat to the brow.

But combining Douglass' *Narrative* with Octavia Butler's contemporary novel *Kindred* in my college freshman humanities course recently led to an assignment radically unlike all the others I had used before. I like most assignments the first time, but seldom try them again—a little like my approach to the Sunday recipes in the *New York Times Magazine*. Some of the thrill and excitement, some of whatever it was that gave the topic tang and zest one year I find too often vanishes when warmed up on a low burner. But I know with certainty that I'll use the Butler assignment again. It still tastes good. The papers it produced have done nothing but fire my enthusiasm for it.

Kindred is an excellent novel to teach side by side with Douglass' *Narrative*. First published in 1979, it tells the story of Dana Franklin, a black woman who lives with her white husband Kevin in a Los Angeles suburb. Her story does not, however, follow the route of conventional fiction. Butler is commonly known as a science fiction writer—one of the few black science fiction writers, by the way, and one of the very few female black science fiction writers. Although Butler sometimes protests this classification as a genre writer, it is clear that in some ways *Kindred* disrupts our traditional expectations for fiction.

Butler's novel begins at the end. "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm," Dana announces in the prologue. Throughout the novel, she experiences frequent episodes of nausea and dizziness that lead mysteriously to her transportation into the world of nineteenth-century slavery. She appears there whenever Rufus Weylin, son of the owner of the Weylin Plantation, is near death. She must save him to save herself, for Rufus will have a child with a slave and that child (Hagar) will begin Dana's own family line. She knew something of this lineage from a notation in her family Bible even before the mysterious and dangerous trips to Talbot County, Maryland, began.

Talbot County? Yes, we're in Frederick Douglass territory once again. Butler researched Douglass' *Narrative* meticulously before writing *Kindred*. She deliberately borrowed his settings, even a few particular scenes. There is textual interplay throughout. And for what purpose? To establish historical continuity, to inject wit and irony, to provide authenticity to a fantastic experience, and to create a lineage of black authors.

All of this was quite wonderful to talk about in class. At one point, as Robert Crossley suggests in his introduction to *Kindred*, Dana's romanticization of the cookhouse is accentuated by her denial of Douglass' image in the *Narrative* that children were fed like pigs at a trough. She sees, instead, children sitting on the floor eating quietly with their fingers. "I was glad to see them there because I'd read about kids their age being rounded up and fed from troughs like pigs. Not everywhere, apparently. At least, not here." About the naiveté Dana registers in "correcting" Douglass, Crossley writes, "Dana behaves as if the cookhouse is a sanctuary. That error in judgment leads to her first vicious flogging when she is detected in the act of teaching slave children to read."

Much later, Dana watches Rufus discover a history book she has brought from home. She thinks about acquainting Rufus with the heroes of black history—Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner—for "if history could be changed, this book in the hands of a white man—even a sympathetic white man—might be the thing to change it." She decides he must not read any of that, however; too much is at risk for her race, for its future heroes, for her own future. And so, only *we* hear her thoughts about Frederick Douglass at this point: "And there were two important slave children

right here in Maryland. The older one, living here in Talbot County, would be called Frederick Douglass after a name change or two." She burns the book, saving only the map of Maryland for her attempted escape.

But it was the larger theme of *Kindred*, along with its unusual and appealing mode, that helped us step into the assignment. It was the theme of revisiting the past to understand and redeem the present—the theme that is also at the heart of slave narratives. With a particular twist from *Kindred*—the twist of mysteriously visiting people who have died before we were born—an idea took shape for a story that could bring the kind of understanding both Frederick Douglass and Octavia Butler must have hoped for in their own work.

As both Douglass and Butler had done, my students would revisit history. And it would be their own, for no true understanding of others can take place without first sifting through the embers and ashes in our own hearths.

The assignment began to form:

Write a short story that loosely follows the narrative lines of Butler's novel. Although you have considerable flexibility, you should make sure the following elements of narrative design are present:

- A "science fiction" format that begins in the present and moves (at least once) to the past, and then back to the present.
- A first-person narrator ("I") who is much like yourself, a narrator who has autobiographical properties (Dana is from L.A., like Butler; Dana says her grandparents worked in the cane fields, as Butler's ancestors had).
- A carefully (and cleverly) thought-out device for transporting your narrator to the past. This can be accomplished in a very non-scientific fashion (as in Butler) or in a very precise scientific way (as in H. G. Wells). Just be sure you don't become so caught up in the details of this description that you lose focus and balance.
- Reconstruction of an episode/event/moment in your own family history that occurred before your birth. This should be something you know only a little about through memories of relatives or random discoveries in papers, genealogies, or official family records.
- Presentation of the past in a way that allows you to bring new meaning and understanding to the present.

- Slight alteration of the past, if helpful to the story. Although it would stretch credibility to change essential "givens," you might rewrite the past so that it proves less daunting to the present. (Butler, for example, cannot change the fact that Rufus is her ancestor, but she can kill him off after Hagar's birth in order to be less troubled in the present by his ties to her.)

- Avoidance of sentimentality and gore. Your story might contain authentic emotion, but don't preach or write sensationally. *Work* for emotion. *Work* for excitement and adventure.

About a quarter of my students chose this topic over others that I offered. They began by remembering conversations with their families. Some realized how few conversations there were to remember. In the absence of others' words, they occasionally imagined pasts that might have been theirs. They imagined ways to explain themselves. It was fictionalized history these students were writing. They were trying to do no more than the great mythmakers have always done: create stories to explain who they were and where the world they had inherited had come from. Yet as in all myths, truth was at the core of everything they said.

My student Patrick returned to October 12, 1919, in Ireland—the date his grandmother boarded an emigrant ship for the United States. Anna explored the tense European political arena that had led her Ukrainian grandparents to change their surname. Sarah told about watching her grandfather through a window in his British home, a grandfather she had never met. He was painting. Raised by two chemists, Sarah had never understood the origin of her own obsession with art—for her, the potter's wheel. She had grown up with the periodic chart as the conversational centerpiece of every family dinner. Sarah wrote, "Through this window I could see a tall lean man with his back towards me. The room was a mess of clay, wax, and paint. The fumes of linseed oil wafted out of the window. The man was painting furiously and chaotically. . . . [My grandfather] stepped to the side to look at this work, and for the first time I saw what was on the canvas. It amazed me, because it was a work full of energy and passion and movement and life."

Amber McNeil, a very quiet student that I had not really noticed much before this assignment, wrote "June," a piece so stunning, complicated, and good that it resists paraphrase.

I hate the smell of eggs, but Grandma fries and flips a couple for me. She ashes her cigarette in a green glass ashtray, thrusts out her chin, and says to me, in a rough drawl, "Get a job first, find out what you want, and then get married. Have something in case it doesn't work out." The women in my family always give me marriage counseling, and I see the proof of what can go wrong, but never any evidence of what is right. My grandma and mom are silent on the particular events of their bad marriages; they only voice their opinions on these troubling and undependable men. I understand their opinions about these men because I have experienced it. I just don't understand why it keeps happening. This pattern is the only tradition my family keeps.

The streetlight outside my grandma's trailer shines down on the icy roads and cliffs of snow that border them. I'm here at grandma's smoky yellow box in the middle of the night because my car could not make it from the nursing home to my house. The odor of medicine and urine rises from my skin to my nostrils, mixing with the smoke from her cigarette and eggs. My stomach cranks out an S.O.S. in rumbles. I am hungry, so I eat the eggs. I yawn, and Grandma tucks me in a small bed in the spare room.

Under Grandma's yellowed blankets, I sink into the bed. My hips expand like bread dough. I feel malleable and fertile like a virgin valley, discovered and staked by a mighty pioneer. This rugged man stares at my stomach with a glazed eye, surveys the valley, and is proud of the land he has conquered. Drunken with his vision, he thinks only of the crops I will reap. The selfish bastard never lets the land rest and lie fallow. After the harvest, I am barren and frozen. These thoughts keep me awake until my tired body kneads and pulls me to sleep.

I awake from my sleep into a dream. My delirious eyes wander around the room to find myself and I see my grandma. "Where am I?" I ask her. "At the YWCA, and you have a fever, sister. Here's some water," she answers. Sister? YWCA? I accept this information because it is a dream and this sort of thing happens. "How is she?" a hazy, bronze man asks, opening the door. "Still mumbling. Can you watch her when I work tomorrow? She has a fever still," my grandma replies. "Sure, June. You sleep some and I'll be over to check on her," he says and closes the door.

I realize I am her sister. We are sleeping in a small bed in a musty, beige room. There are some nursing uniforms hanging up to dry. My grandma sits reading by an old lamp, which stands among the dead flies on the windowsill. She stretches out her long tan legs and crosses her ankles. Her thick dark hair falls down the back of the rickety wooden chair. "Who was here?" I ask my skinny grandma, who now, only eighteen years old, holds a paperback with the same strong, bony hands. "That was Gene. He just come over here to see if your delirium was up. He lives down the road and I met him over at the golf course the other day. Go to sleep now." I make some connections in my head. Gene is the

grandpa I never knew because he killed himself when my mother was sixteen years old. He was very handsome and everyone loved his sanguine temper. At home, he was a violent alcoholic. I try to picture him eating dinner with my mom and grandma. In my delirium, I confuse his face with my father's. I fall back asleep.

I wake up to the smell of butter and cigarettes. I'm in the bedroom of the trailer. Grandma is frying again and baking cornbread. I push out of bed and sink to the furry yellow floor and make my way into the living room and cross over the thin metal strip which separates the living room and kitchen. "Grandma, did you ever live at a YWCA? What did you do then?" I ask, curious about my dream. "Opal, my sister, and I lived there, while I worked in the nursing home. Well, Mom and Dad didn't have much and we would work, you know, to help out. I worked and lived at the YWCA until I got married and moved from Virginia to Ohio. Didn't have to work when I got married. I only started when your mother left home to get married, 'cause she was pregnant with you, and then my widow's benefits ran out." She went on to tell me of the evils of working manual labor for an entire lifetime. "If you have an education and can get a job that doesn't break your back, you don't have to depend on anyone else," she tells me—her constant advice.

My grandma has been very independent her whole life. She says what she thinks and does what she believes is right. She never went on any dates and spends most evenings watching TV and reading. Or she calls my family when she is lonely. Sometimes she calls every day. She is still long and sprightly with short frizzy brown hair and dark skin. She started out as a nurse's aide and her last job was as a janitor in a mental hospital. Hard physical labor, cigarettes, and cheap paperbacks have been her friends and kept her mind from sinking into her troubled past, her tarnished attempt at love and ruined marriage.

My mother's father was like a golden hero, muscular and bronze with a shiny smile. He must have purred like a new-oiled car and said all the right things that would tame and melt my grandma. She turned from a strong, wiry sculpture to a ball of clay when he dated and married her.

Grandma and I watch TV and I start to nod off. I'm tossed again into a dream. I'm at a golf course in the late morning. Grandma is putting and Grandpa holds up the flag so that she can hit the ball in. I hold the golf bag. The sun shines down on the crown of my head, burning my hair. Grandma wears a yellow handkerchief. "Tina, take my putter for me," grandma asks, looking at me. "Oh," is all I manage to say. I am surprised because my mother's name is Tina. Again, it is a dream, but I begin to take on the characteristics of my mother. I trip over to Grandma and take the putter. "You and Tina go on home, I'm gonna stay at the club for a while," Gene says and turns to walk down the hill. A frown and a silent anger settle in my grandma's forehead and eyes. "Let's go home," she says and steers me to the car.

At home, I assume the role of the obedient and indifferent daughter quite easily and I read a book while Grandma sunbathes in a yellow bikini. The sun is so hot on my dark hair and I bite my nails, worried about something. I feel so vulnerable and little as if something is lurking around the trees and the house where I sit. A car pulls up, and Gene stumbles out. "Hiya! How's it going, kiddo?" he says to me. I freeze, my neck stiffens and I mumble that I'm O.K. "What? I can't hear you. Goddammit, Tina. Speak up when I talk to you. Look at me!" he yells abruptly, which makes my passive lips press tighter. Grandma walks over and says, "Leave her alone, Gene. You've been drinking again, haven't you? Why do you go off and have fun with your friends, but come back home to cause trouble? Go back to the club and sober up." Gene turns red and sweat runs down into his pristine white collar. "What? Are you saying something? Why don't you respect me enough to say something intelligible? Stupid women, biting or painting your nails. I am tired of this!" he yells and throws his golf clubs on the ground. I shriek and run inside the house. From the window I see them fighting and he grabs Grandma's arm. The phone rings and I answer, "Hello? Oh, god, come over and pick me up. Dad's drunk." It's my mom's boyfriend. I am so caught up in this that I act as if he is really my boyfriend. I actually don't know if my dream is the reality and what I thought was real is actually a dream. I am scared of my dad, now, and I want to escape.

In front of my house, my boyfriend pulls up and I try to sneak in the car without my parents noticing and trying to stop me. We drive away to the woods and I feel less nervous. "Are you O.K.?" he asks. "Yes, John. Thank you," I say before realizing that John is my dad. We settle back in the seats in silence and relax. It is springtime and the faintest scents of wildflowers come in from the woods. "I want to leave them, but I want to help them. I just want to leave most of all," I say to John, who rolls a cigarette for me. "I'll take care of you. Come here."

* * *

I wake up in the trailer to the sounds of "Jeopardy" on the TV. "I'll be back, Grandma," I say, and leave to go to the bedroom to decipher my dreams.

I come from a line of pretty enough women. We are so fertile, but without any bounty but babies to show. I feel my body preparing for the seeds to be sown. Some of the seeds will fall on rocky soil, and others will not receive water, but on my rich and pure soil, they will sprout and grow like Jack's beanstalk with a happy ending in the blossoms. There hasn't been a happy ending for the previous child-bearers. With each conception before marriage, an unhappy marriage follows. Will I have to surrender my independence to be married? And will I then be happy? I want to change the pattern that my body feels prepared to take in. If

I change it, perhaps the tradition will become extinct and in place of a desperate need for love, my children will have a creative and fruitful vision. I will give them clear water and truth to nurture them. I am food for them, but I will not be plowed by any man.

With the spirit and purpose of Frederick Douglass lodged firmly in her mind, with the techniques of Octavia Butler in her bag of narrative tricks, Amber produced an unforgettable piece of writing. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy recently said this about Butler's protagonist: "Home and kindred, as Dana learns, are what you make with your own performance of history." The same might be said of Amber's autobiographical narrator—of Amber herself. She faced her history with courage. And by staring it down, she became an active agent of her past—revising it forever.

Douglass meticulously recorded the connection between literacy and freedom. In her own way, so did Amber. Although she did not choose an analytical assignment, Amber understood better than anyone else in the room the most important message of Douglass' *Narrative*. She sensed the importance of writing our own passes to freedom.

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Alfred E. Prettyman

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

A DEVELOPING SELF

MY FATHER WAS A MASTER of two kinds of magic: how to get people to make music as a concert or marching band, and how to take pictures, with an assortment of cameras, and then develop the film, in a darkroom, into photographs. Each of his kinds of magic had an element of unpredictability. Things could go wrong in ways he could not anticipate.

To watch him use his bellows enlarger to focus bright silhouettes of film negative on photographic paper, follow his hands as he immersed that paper in a tray of developing fluid—pinching just enough of its edge to agitate the paper in the fluid steadily, stroking the fluid broadly over the paper—to see the ghostly figures emerge, faintly, then fully into live faces was awesome to me as a boy. The wrong temperature of the developing fluid, a sheet from a bad patch of photographic paper, a nervous nudge by me that might jostle the enlarger as it imprinted the photographic paper with the image of the negative, and the silhouettes would emerge in a blur.

Similar care is wise in developing oneself. In his *Narrative* Douglass tells us how he came to realize that he need not be a slave for life. "The light broke in upon me by degrees," when, as he volunteered his help to two Irishmen in unloading stone from a scow, one of those men said it was a pity that such a fine fellow as he should be a slave for life. They both advised Douglass to run away to the north, where he would find friends among *abolitionists*—a word whose meaning now became clear, although he pretended not to understand. He knew, after all, of white men who would trick slaves into running away just so they could capture them and collect a reward for bringing them back. At that moment there was no way of knowing if those two men could be trusted: "I was afraid that these seemingly good men might use me so, but I nevertheless remembered their advice, and from that time I resolved to escape." There were two practical considerations that constrained him for the time being: "I was too

young to think of doing so immediately, besides, I wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass." The ability to write was essential to his self-development, essential to his true freedom.

He already had learned, bitterly, how crucial it was to be able to read. After his mother, Harriet Bailey, died in 1826, the eight-year-old Frederick was sent from Talbot County, Maryland, to live with Hugh and Sophia Auld in Baltimore. Mrs. Auld, who had never had charge of a slave, began to teach Frederick how to read. When Hugh Auld later discovered this, he forbade it, saying it was both unlawful and unsafe to teach a slave to read. "It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." In that moment Douglass understood what until then had been "a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man . . . I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom . . . The argument which he so warmly urged, against learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and a determination to learn."

Thereafter Douglass took a book with him wherever he was sent on errands. He also took a pocketful of bread, in exchange for which the poor white children in his neighborhood would give him a reading lesson. To command language was essential to becoming free, to gaining the capacity to shape his future. It also brought with it a clearer understanding of how wretched it is not to be free, a sense of anguish from the mere thinking of freedom. But there was no turning back. "The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in everything . . . I saw nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it."

This keen recollection in the *Narrative* of 1845 is invoked again by the central character, Madison Washington, in Part I of Douglass' 1853 novel *The Heroic Slave*: "Liberty I will have, or die in the attempt to gain it. This working that others may live in idleness! This living under the constant dread and apprehension of being sold and transferred, like a mere brute, is *too* much for me. I will stand it no longer. What others have done, I will do . . . Tom escaped; so can I. The North Star will be no less kind to me than to him. I will follow it. I will at least make the trial. I have nothing to lose."

There were several men in my father's concert band who had a marvelous sense of intonation and harmony, who had a great facility with their instruments, and who understood time values, but who did not read notes. There was little likelihood that they would drift out of register as long as he sat them between two readers on whom they could rely. Thus he created unorthodox groupings of instruments—a sprinkle of brass among the woodwinds, a violin between trumpet and french horns. The ear could not detect such odd choirs when the band was playing. This could become a frustrating accommodation for my father at times, in spite of his affection for these men. In rehearsal a passionate enthusiasm for the music would lead an instrumentalist off pitch. A stern glance to have him lower his instrument until he could reenter on pitch might lead the anxious instrumentalist to play more passionately off pitch for another bar, trying to relocate his part. In those maddening moments my father may have had the urge to strike the instrumentalist down; but the most exasperated and devastating thing he could say to that straying instrumentalist was "If Frederick Douglass could learn to read and write English in slavery, why can't you learn to read music in freedom?"

The example of Douglass' life had long been an assurance to my father. After the death of his own mother, his father, Pa Gus, left a farm in Howard County, Maryland, for Baltimore, where there was steady work as a hod carrier.* In order to help support the family, my father had to leave school after the fourth grade and go to work. It did not deflect him from becoming the musician he yearned to be. By the time he was twenty-one he, a proficient concert violinist and accomplished cornet and trumpet player, was conducting his own concert band.

Daddy's stories led me to read the *Narrative* as a junior high school student. And as a graduate of Baltimore's historic Douglass High School, P.S. 450—following my sister, two brothers, and such friends as Dr. Phyllis A. Wallace, the Yale economist who joined the faculty of M.I.T., and Ellis Larkins, the legendary jazz pianist with the exquisite touch—I continue to find my father and Douglass embedded in my North Star constellation. For my students, who range

* A hod is a longhandled wooden trough carried on the shoulder, holding mortar and brick.

in age from mid-teens to middle-aged returning adults, the linking of Douglass' life with that of my father makes Douglass a less remote person, especially when I mention that my Grand Pa Gus was a young man when Douglass was alive. With these linkages neither slavery nor Reconstruction seems as removed as they once might have. I ask my students to discover who, if anyone, among their relatives was alive at those same times and whether they had passed any stories of life then on to family members alive now. Some students return with such stories. Others report the reluctance of family members to recall such stories of the past. Some students whose families have lived in New York State for generations can elicit an anecdote about how members of their family had lived in a time when Douglass was alive and active in Rochester, New York.

Of more immediate significance to my students, usually, is the appreciation of Douglass' awareness of critical choices that he faced and how conscious he was about taking advantage of them with deliberate preparation. They come to see, as Douglass came to see, that he need not remain a slave. That he could choose to act to become free. And to make that choice required him to prepare himself and plan his path to freedom. That done, he had maximized his opportunity to become and remain free—both literally and metaphorically.

For a writing assignment, I ask them to do one of three things: 1) to recount from their lives significant acts or risks taken by them that become empowering; 2) to compare and contrast Douglass' self-description with that of Harriet Jacobs' "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl"; or 3) to analyze Douglass' depiction of women in his *Narrative* and in *The Heroic Slave* and discuss the differences in his realizations of the characters of women and the characters of men. Although fewer students may choose assignments 2 or 3, because they are more time-consuming, given their schedule of full-time work and full-time study in a community college, age is no predictor of who will do the more difficult assignment. Sometimes students whose writing skills are not exceptional do choose the more time-consuming assignment (2 or 3). This may require them to spend some extra time working with Writing Center teachers on how to organize their papers and in producing first drafts that I can discuss with them individually. I encourage students who are working on the same topic to talk with one another and test their insights. Some, naturally, prefer to work alone. Those who take on the first

assignment often surprise themselves by the way they shape their lives in writing about them—they certainly surprise me continually with their candor. To have students see for themselves elements of character construction in life and in literature is why I tell them Douglass' story in this way.

Meredith Sue Willis

FREDERICK DOUGLASS IN NEWARK

THE BRAGAW AVENUE Elementary School in Newark, New Jersey, is situated in a relatively quiet neighborhood of houses and empty lots that are often used as vegetable gardens. The building itself, a big brick block overlooking Interstate 78, reminds me of the old-fashioned school I attended growing up in West Virginia. We, too, had kids from little first graders to big eighth graders in the same building; like Bragaw, our school smelled of lunches past and musty steam from aged pipes. In our school too, some of the teachers had taught our parents, and even though many of the students were not interested in academics, others went on to establish solid records in high school.

I'd been visiting Bragaw for three years as a writer-in-the-schools in a program sponsored by the New Jersey State Arts Council and the Newark Board of Education. The Bragaw area is in no way a hopeless place, but it has substantial, chronic central-city problems. Unemployment is rampant; a girl last year wrote a piece about her introduction to crack; and this year we had our first shooting on the playground, albeit after school hours.

The virtual abandonment of cities such as Newark by affluent and middle-class Americans, with the related residential segregation, is reason enough to study the history of American race relations and slavery. Frederick Douglass seemed like a perfect place to begin.

I was already acquainted with Douglass' autobiography through an excellent collection edited and introduced by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., called *The Classic Slave Narratives*, and I had even used a passage from another document in that volume, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," in my book for students, *Blazing Pencils: A Guide to Writing Fiction & Essays*. I included the passage in a packet of chapters that were read and tried out by high school students in California. It was in no way part of a lesson on slavery or black history, but rather appeared in a section on anecdote and memory:

I remember the first time I was punished. It was in the month of February. My grandmother had taken my old shoes, and replaced them with a new pair. I needed them; for several inches of snow had fallen, and it still continued to fall. When I walked through Mrs. Flint's room, their creaking grated harshly on her refined nerves. She called me to her, and asked what I had about me that made such a horrid noise. I told her it was my new shoes. "Take them off," said she; "and if you put them on again, I'll throw them into the fire."

I took them off, and my stockings also. She then sent me a long distance, on an errand. As I went through the snow, my bare feet tingled. That night I was very hoarse; and I went to bed thinking the next day would find me sick, perhaps dead. What was my grief on waking to find myself quite well!

I had imagined if I died, or was laid up for some time, that my mistress would feel a twinge of remorse that she had so hated "the little imp," as she styled me. It was my ignorance of that mistress that gave rise to such extravagant imaginings.

—Linda Brent¹

I love the way Linda Brent, like so many of us, imagines how everyone will be sorry for how they treated her—once she's dead. The special poignancy here is that she is at once such a typical young girl—but, in her case, the cruelty and misuse are not imagined or exaggerated.

My assignment in *Blazing Pencils* was as follows: "Write about one of your memories. This could be something that happened when you were much younger, or it could be something that happened this morning. Tell it as a story: first this happened and then that." One girl wrote in response:

I was only eight years old and in the third grade when it happened. Everyone else was doing it, so I did it too. You got on the slide, and went speeding down on your feet in a squat position. It looked like a blast, until it was my turn. I started to climb up to the top of the slide. I threw a handful of sand down the slide to make it even slicker. I got on my feet, squatted down, pushed off, and sped quickly down. But before I reached the end, something happened. I fell forward and landed flat on my stomach. I also saw one half of my front tooth ahead of me. I ran into the bathroom and looked into the mirror. I started crying hard. My front tooth was chipped. One half of it chipped off when I fell forward on the slide. I cried & cried. I called my mom & she picked me up. I finally got a bonding on it about 8 months later. This is a memory I have when I see a slide.

—Heidi Stockert, ninth grade

For my purposes, the Linda Brent narrative was simply an excellent model of strong narrative form. It pleased me to include it in this way rather than ghettoizing it as something only for a Civil War or black studies class. And if Heidi Stockert's association was to a broken tooth she suffered as a little girl, that was fine too. That was *her* memory, *her* association, and it has always seemed to me that creative writing is above all the discipline of starting where you are—with your own authentic concerns and experiences.

I had never used the Linda Brent excerpt at Bragaw, probably because of my discomfort over being the one to bring up the subject of slavery and segregation. A white person, I hesitated to instruct the students, mostly African-American, on their own heritage without being explicitly invited.

And it was not as if the school ignored their heritage. We were in the middle of Black History month, with relevant auditorium programs almost every day. Teachers came to school wearing kinte cloth and African headgear; there were drawings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on the bulletin boards. We had already scheduled a visit from a performing group that does a musical black history program, as well as a trip for the eighth graders to the Crossroads Theater to see a one-woman show about Harriet Tubman.

In addition, I invited Wesley Brown, a writer and professor at Rutgers University (and the editor of this book), to Bragaw for a one-day visit to the four classes I was teaching, two sixth grades and two eighth grades. He asked that the students read chapters 6 and 7 from the 1845 Frederick Douglass autobiography before his visit. These chapters tell about how Douglass learned to read by variously tricking and bribing white people around him.

I gave copies of the chapters to each student in the four classes. A few days later, the session before Wesley's visit, we read much of the material aloud in class. Even though the story is exciting, its nineteenth-century style has complex language and sentence structure that many students today find challenging. I read aloud the more analytical passages, and the kids read narrative and dialogue. It turned out I had underestimated my students. Many of them really loved pronouncing the long rolling perorations: "But alas! . . . The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work."²

Even with the imprimatur of Wesley's request, I had difficulty being a white teaching about slavery, so I presented the Douglass chapters simply as autobiography. I had been asking the students to write in various narrative genres—horror, mystery, ghost stories—so I brought in the Douglass chapters along with another sample of autobiography. I said, "Today we're looking at autobiography. First, here is a short example from a white woman painter named Georgia O'Keeffe about how a teacher didn't respect her, and next are the chapters you've read from the great nineteenth-century black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass."

I then handed out the Georgia O'Keeffe excerpt:

The fall I was thirteen, I was taken to boarding school—a Dominican convent beyond Madison. The Sister who had charge of the art classes had beautiful large dark eyes and very white lovely hands, but she always felt a bit hot and stuffy to me. I felt like shrinking away from her.

My first day in the studio she placed a white plaster cast of a baby's hand on a table, gave me some charcoal and told me to draw it. I worked laboriously—all in a cramp—drawing the baby's hand with a very heavy black line. I thought my drawing very nice and I liked doing it. When the Sister saw it she was very impatient. She said I had drawn the hand too small and my lines were all too black. She particularly emphasized the fact that it was too small. At the time I thought that she scolded me terribly. I was so embarrassed that it was difficult not to cry. The Sister sat down and drew a few light lines blocking in the way she thought the drawing should be started. It looked very strange to me—not at all beautiful like my own drawing. I wasn't convinced that she was right, but I said to myself that I would never have that happen again. I would never, never draw anything too small. So I drew the hand a little bit larger than she suggested and that whole year never made a heavy black line again. I worked mostly with a fairly hard lead pencil and always drew everything a little larger and a little lighter than I really thought it should be.³

I've been using this piece for many years because I like Georgia O'Keeffe and her book, and because it is fun to talk about teaching and learning in school. There's always the little undercurrent of excitement: "I'm a teacher, you're a student, we're talking about our relationship, which is happening even as we speak!" I was also, of course, edging toward the issue of race. Here is one person's autobiographical learning experience, I was saying, and Oh, by the way, here's another one. Frederick Douglass' experience with learning, of course, was very different from Georgia O'Keeffe's. The adults in

Douglass' life did not merely deny him the validity of his personal vision; they did not roughly shove his creativity underground; rather, they tried to smother his autonomy as a human being.

The passages we read in his autobiography tell about how he found a way to trick people into teaching him what he desperately needed to know. He had the good fortune to get a start from a white woman who at least began as a positive force in his life. In this passage, Douglass describes his new mistress, Mrs. Auld. She had been a working woman herself and had to be taught to treat her slaves as less than human:

My new mistress proved to be all she appeared when I first met her at the door,—a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings. She had never had a slave under her control previously to myself. . . . I was utterly astonished at her goodness. I scarcely knew how to behave towards her. She was entirely unlike any other white woman I had ever seen. . . . The crouching servility, usually so acceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward her. . . . Her face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music.

But alas! . . . That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon.⁴

This was an important passage for me personally: I was able to talk about how slavery had a pernicious effect on the morals and sensibilities of white people. I think the parallel can be drawn to racism today, which is so often regarded as a black problem rather than a problem of American society as a whole.

The passage in the *Narrative* continues:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world."⁵

I chose a student to read this section aloud, because I was raised in a family where I was not allowed to use the word *nigger*—in fact,

as I told the students, I still cannot pronounce it without great effort and embarrassment. It's not that my parents were so socially enlightened, but that they recognized that words are powerful and that some words used in some ways are purely evil, and I was taught to view that word in that way.

The material from the autobiography was so compelling that we did no writing that day. The eighth graders, in particular, seemed to take great satisfaction in taking turns reading aloud. I also used the technique of asking what stuck in their minds most from what we'd read. The hands-down favorite in all four classes was a gory description of a beating.

Wesley Brown had hoped, he told me later, to have "a discussion of the importance of reading and writing in life of someone to whom it was prohibited—the great value of writing and reading, and how Douglass did it under enormous pressure and at risk of life and limb." He wanted to jar the students a little, to have them look at literacy not as a chore, but as something precious, a gift.

At the next session, when Wesley visited the classes, the students were at least as interested in the person as in the lesson. It seems to me that part of our message is always who we are: Wesley the novelist, student of the works of Frederick Douglass, college professor, black man, individual who delights in the play of language in his novels and in his conversation. To the students, he was also a man who had a beard on his book jacket, and no beard in person!

Wesley spoke of the act of reading as a weapon. Douglass' oratorical gifts, he said, came from his understanding of the power of words both written and spoken. To be able to read is one aspect of freedom. Reading and writing help you define who you are, and they help you articulate who you are to other people.

The eighth graders were deeply engaged, but very quiet. This had been my experience of these students, too. Perhaps they have internalized the idea that being good in school means being silent; perhaps they are reserved as a group; perhaps it is their reaction to adolescence—but their most eloquent expression this year had been on paper. One student, for example, who usually slept through class, watched Wesley intently, and then, when Wesley gave in-class assignments, wrote an informative and perceptive short essay about Malcolm X.

The sixth graders, on the other hand, were full of questions. Most of their questions had to do less with the power of the word, and more with the Peculiar Institution itself. Wesley said afterwards that he was very impressed by how they wanted to know *everything*. What did Frederick Douglass look like physically? In particular, they wanted to know more about Douglass' father—a white man! They were troubled that Douglass had so little contact with his mother. They wanted to know what happened if a slave was not able to work. Elderly? Crippled? Were they still treated as slaves? Did you *ever* get out of slavery? Never? Do you really mean never?

Wesley told me: "I was fascinated by their questions—'How is it possible that someone whose parent was white was still a slave? What if they didn't look black?' The material made them think. The overriding question was, 'What did slavery mean?' They were captivated by what slavery meant."

I too was amazed by this. I talked later to the sixth grade teacher. I asked her why the students were so hungry to know about slavery. "Doesn't it get covered in school?" I asked her. "Isn't it discussed during Black History Month?" She said there is a tendency in the schools—which she generally supports—to emphasize the positive, to uplift the kids, but we agreed that students need to know the whole story.

Wesley's writing assignments were designed to connect the whole story—history—to the students' own lives. This has always seemed to me to be the essential thing that creative writing can do in the classroom: it allows students to explore and organize ideas and information in relation to their own experience. Wesley offered four possible assignments to help make these connections. Some students wrote about a dream for the future, as Frederick Douglass dreamed of reading and writing and being free; some wrote about a time in real life they had felt compelled to lie, as Douglass had lied to get out of slavery; some wrote about a time they tricked someone, as Douglass had tricked the little white boys into sharing their knowledge of letters and words with him. Some of the most interesting responses among the eighth graders came from the fourth assignment: write about a time you learned something you were sorry you learned, the way Douglass was sorry when he realized how illiteracy was being used to hold people in slavery.

In response to that topic, eighth grader Quianna Edwards wrote a story that she subsequently polished with her basic skills teacher:

What I Didn't Know

I'm a black boy. I don't know anybody. I just moved around here. It's real quiet. There are no blacks around here. Just my sister, mother, big brother, and me. My father had died in the war, but I don't know why.

So I was in my room looking out the window, and I saw two white boys, and they were playing catch. So I asked my mother if I could go outside and make some friends. She said, "Yes," so I went outside. One of the boys stopped playing catch and came over to me. He said, "Who lives in your house?" I said my sister, mother, brother, and me. He said where's your father. I said my father is dead. The boy asked how did he die? I said, "I don't know." He said what's your father's name. I said it's Frankie Wisdom, and he died last year. The boy said, "Where was your father working?" I said my father was in the war. Then he asked, "Was your father fighting for blacks?" I said yes!

Then I went into the house, because it was late. When I went into the house I got a picture of my father and asked my mother how he died. My mother said he was killed by a white man in the war.

The next day I asked him where his father was! He told me that he died.

A year went by and we became best friends. I asked my friend what was his father's name, and he said Johnnie White. So I went into the house and asked my mother if she knew the name of the man that killed my father? She said it was Johnnie White. I was really shocked because I was friends with the son of the man that killed my father!

I like this piece because Quianna so obviously got involved in her story and was willing to give it extra time and work. I also like it for its mix of partially invented history (that war where Frankie Wisdom died fighting for blacks—when was it?) and an imagined but possible situation: what would happen if a black kid moved into a neighborhood with white kids next door? Would friendship be possible? This latter question is a real one in New Jersey. Quianna's neighborhood in Newark is almost all black, but there are mixed towns in the vicinity, and towns where working class whites are even now fleeing integration. There are also a handful of towns and neighborhoods where people are fighting to preserve integration and true diversity. In her own way, I believe Quianna is asking the question: Is it possible in America today for black and white people to live together with some semblance of equality and justice?

Quianna's classmates had some ideas on the subject—not at the abstracted level of sociology, but at the level of individual experience and storytelling. I usually read a few pieces from the previous week to the class before beginning the new lesson, and a week after Wesley's visit to Bragaw, I read Quianna's aloud. Her classmates clapped, and began to discuss what would happen next. Some of the students, particularly the ones who are bound for Newark's academic high schools next fall, said that of course the boys could and should continue as friends. Others insisted that the situation demanded retribution.

It seemed to me that we were discussing something that was both about individual behavior (what do I do if someone has wronged me?) and about historical injustice (what does America owe the descendants of slaves a century and a quarter after slavery officially ended?). I found myself very involved in the outcome of the debate, and jettisoned the lesson I had planned. Instead, as I read I asked the class to write their own endings to Quianna's story, changing anything they wanted. I was so pleased with the discussion and writing that I used this exercise not only in Quianna's class, but in the other eighth grade and in the two sixth grade classes as well.

In each class, the discussion continued to be lively. The sixth graders didn't surprise me, but the other eighth grade class opened up too. Their classroom teacher told a real-life story from the neighborhood around Bragaw about a family of brothers whose father was murdered, and how the brothers discussed and prayed and in the end decided not to try to get back at the killers.

Here are some samples of what the eighth graders wrote:

The next day I saw Peter and Jason standing outside getting out their bikes. I suddenly felt an urge of hatred towards the two boys. Then they said, Do you want to ride with us? I said no. I said, Did you know your father killed my father? They replied with a stutter. They finally said, Yes, but we didn't know how you were going to feel. I said, If you ever say something to me again, I'll kill you! Then I walked in my house with joyiness on my face.

—*Muhaymin Dukes*

When the boy went back outside, he ran up to the white boy and said, "Can I speak to you alone?" They both went and sat on the black boy's porch and started talking. The black boy said, "Your father had killed

my father in the war." So the white boy said, "How do you know that?" The black boy said, "Because I asked my mother what was the man's name who killed my father, and it just so happened to be your father's name." After a moment of silence, the white boy said, "There's nothing neither one of us could do about it because both fathers are dead, and it wouldn't make sense to fight or argue over it because it's not going to bring them back." The black boy said, "I guess you're right, we should still be friends." Then the two boys hugged and ran to play catch.

—Wahyidah Gaines

I think the little black boy will probably say, did you know that your father had killed my dad? The white boy will say yes. The black boy will say, Why didn't you tell me? The white boy will say, I wanted to keep being your friend. The black boy will say, We still would have been friends. The white boy said, I'm sorry I kept this a secret. Can we still be friends? The black boy said, As long as you don't keep secrets from me no longer. The black boy said, If you do, I will do what your father did to my father. If you don't believe me, try me.

—Rahjan Williams

My name is Johny and I just found out that my best friend—which is a white boy—his father killed my father. So I'm going to go outside to have a few words with him. Well, I went outside. I shoved the boy. I started crying. I said It's because of you that my father is dead. Then he started to run. I chased him into an abandoned building. I caught him on the stairs. I started punching him in his face, then I started punching him in his stomach. Then he dropped. I started to kick him in his side, but then I realized I was wrong. I stopped beating him up. I started crying again. I said, I'm so sorry. I'm just mad because your father killed my father. I'm sorry I blamed it on you. Then I helped him up. I took him to my house. My mother made sure he was alright. Then she got his phone number and called his house. She told his mother to come and get him. When his mother came over, our mothers had a long conversation about everything that happened and why it happened. When they came out of the room, me and the little white boy Sam were playing. I had apologized and we were friends again.

—Zakiyyah Salaam

To me, these lessons circling around and spinning off from the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* exemplify the way literature can inspire children to take in information and make it their own. As Wesley Brown says, "It's enormously important to use material like the Douglass autobiography that wouldn't ordinarily be used

in the classroom. The students might never be exposed to it. It is not necessary that they write directly about Douglass' subject matter—slavery, oppression—but they can use it to think about their own lives and then perhaps make connections. I get excited when their questions come from their own place, not from something someone else fed them."

To me, the question is—to continue Wesley's metaphor—not so much whether or not kids will be fed—because one way or another they are fed every day by teachers, by television, by friends, and by family. The real challenge is how to make sure they get a nourishing and varied diet. Will they get potato chips and soda on the run? Will they be force-fed pabulum when they crave something highly spiced? Will we pay them the respect of setting the table attractively? And will the conversation at the table include listening to them as well as talking at them, even if the lesson they take away is not quite the one we set out to teach?

Notes

1. Linda Brent, from "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (New American Library, 1987), pp. 353–354.
2. Douglass, in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, p. 274.
3. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Viking, 1976).
4. Douglass, in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, p. 274.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

Jordan Davis, Christopher Edgar, and Ron Padgett

THIRTY-TWO WRITING IDEAS USING DOUGLASS' NARRATIVE

THE THIRTY-TWO IDEAS below provide various suggestions for writing. Many of them can be used by people of all ages; a few would work best with students of high school age and older. The ideas connect passages in Douglass' *Narrative* with incidents and memories in the lives of students. Of course, those incidents and memories won't be (we hope) as horrific as some of Douglass'. Our motive is not to trivialize Douglass, of course, but to show students that they have had experiences not totally unrelated to his, that in fact they may have more in common with him than they might think.

These writing ideas aim to encourage complexity of thought and feeling, as in Douglass' combination of hatred for slavery and his ironic and grudging respect for it as a "grand achievement." In addition, Douglass cleverly balances horrific passages with lighter ones. Our writing ideas point to these complexities that help make the *Narrative* deeper and more interesting than a "flat" story would be.

The ideas are arranged according to the chronology of the *Narrative*. The page numbers below refer to the 1986 Penguin Classics edition of the *Narrative*. If you are using a different edition, you can still find the references fairly easily, because Douglass' chapters tend to be brief.

CHAPTER 1

1. In the book's first paragraph, Douglass' master won't tell him when he had been born. Think of a time when you wanted to know something, but an adult (or someone else) wouldn't tell you. Describe the incident in detail and be as truthful about it as possible.

2. Early on in his *Narrative*, Douglass describes the horrors of slave life in a way that makes the reader sit up and pay attention. He does this with graphic details, but at the same time he retains the distance of an objective observer. Write an account of a terrible event in your life, describing it in a "flat," objective way, but using vivid details.

3. In the first chapter, Plummer the overseer flogs Douglass' Aunt Hester. On p. 51, Douglass says, "I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass." Describe the flogging from the point of view of Plummer and then of Douglass' aunt, and try not to flinch.

4. Have you ever watched a friend or sibling be spanked? Recall and describe it as clearly as you can, and tell how it made you feel.

CHAPTER 2

5. Douglass criticizes one of his masters, Mr. Severe, for both his cruelty and his "bitter curses and horrid oaths" (p. 56). Describe someone you've known who said things you thought were awful. You don't have to name the person. Give some particular instances and examples of this person's cursing, and tell how it made you feel.

6. Douglass mentions the "privilege" of running an errand (pp. 56-57). Describe a time when someone picked you to do something special, even if it wasn't something very important.

7. Douglass talks about the songs sung by his fellow slaves, and how, years later, these songs still "get" him (pp. 57-58). Do old songs still "get" you sometimes? Tell which songs and explain why they have a special effect on you.

8. On p. 58, Douglass says, "I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the North, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to make a greater mistake. Slaves sing when they are

most unhappy. . . ." Write about a time when someone completely misunderstood your behavior or how you were feeling.

9. Douglass writes, "I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness" (p. 58). Do you ever sing to yourself? Under what circumstances do you sing? Why do you sing the songs you do? What kind of songs are they? What effect do they have on you?

CHAPTER 3

10. On p. 59, the temptation of the fruit in Colonel Lloyd's garden (and the punishment of tarring) has overtones of Genesis, the Garden of Eden, original sin, etc. Have you ever experienced a temptation so powerful you decided to risk everything, even though you knew you would probably be caught? If so, write about it.

CHAPTER 4

11. To Douglass, one of the great travesties of slavery was that slaves could not bear witness against white men (e.g., Mr. Gore's killing the slave at the creek, p. 67). Write an account of a particularly heinous crime from the perspective of a "voiceless" and "unbelievable" witness. Or write about a time when no one would believe something you said, even though it was true.

CHAPTER 5 AND 6

12. On pp. 74–75 (ch. 5), Douglass says that going to Baltimore dramatically changed his life. Have you ever moved from one country to another, from a rural area to a big city, from one town to another, or even from one neighborhood to another, so that it made a big difference in your life? Write about the move, telling how your life changed, and guess what your life might have been like if you hadn't moved.

13. Douglass comes across as amazingly generous. On p. 75 (ch. 5), he praises God for delivering him from slavery, but he doesn't curse God for allowing him to be born a slave in the first place. In other instances, Douglass finds something positive to say about some of his cruel masters. He even finds something good to say about the thing he hates most, slavery, describing it as "a grand achievement" (ch. 6,

p. 78). Write about a person or thing you fear or dislike, but include something positive.

CHAPTER 7

14. At the age of around twelve, "the thought of being a slave for life began to bear heavily upon [Douglass'] heart" (p. 83). The end of his childhood brings with it an ability to see into the future, to get some idea of what his whole life might be like. Did this ever happen to you? Was there a time when you began to think about what the rest of your life might be like? Describe that time, and how you felt, and what you thought.

15. Douglass is very good at seeing the other side of any idea or question. For example, on p. 84 he says, "Learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing." Think of something that people ordinarily think of as good, and tell why it also can be bad.

16. Douglass seems to take a great pride in his ruthlessly objective, sometimes seemingly tongue-in-cheek descriptions of his various owners: "Mr. Severe was rightly named." "Mr. Gore was proud, ambitious, and persevering. He was artful, cruel, and obdurate. His words were in perfect keeping with his looks, and his looks were in perfect keeping with his words." "[Captain Auld] might have passed for a lion, but for his ears. In all things noble which he attempted, his meanness shone out conspicuous." "Mr. Covey's *forte* consisted in his power to deceive . . . He seemed to think himself equal to deceiving the Almighty." Describe someone you hate, in a way that conveys irony or a grudging respect or both.

17. On p. 84, he also says, "I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast." He wanted "to get rid of thinking." Have you ever wished you weren't human? Describe what caused you to feel that way, and tell what you might have preferred to have been. Or describe a time when you wanted to "get rid of thinking."

18. Douglass becomes "obsessed" with the idea of freedom (p. 85). He can't think of much of anything else. Write about a time that you were obsessed with something or someone. Tell everything about it.

19. Can you remember learning to read or write? Describe some of your memories of learning to identify the letters of the alphabet, and how you began to decipher words on the page. Do you remember seeing or hearing your parents or relatives reading before you were able to read? How did it make you feel?

20. On his own, Douglass finally figures out the meaning of the word *abolition*. Write about a word whose true meaning escaped you for a long time, and perhaps still does. Was your not knowing it a mystery or an embarrassment? Talk about what you guessed the word meant, and how you finally learned its true meaning (if you did). (Most intelligent people use at least a few words they don't quite understand.)

21. Douglass wanted to learn to write so he could commit forgery, to write a pass that would enable him to escape (p. 86). Write about something you wrote or said that wasn't true, but which you did for a good reason.

22. To learn how to write the alphabet, Douglass tricked boys into writing out words, by boasting that he could write as well as they (pp. 86–87). Write about a trick you played on someone.

CHAPTER 8

23. In one of Douglass' rare uses of fantasy in this book (pp. 91–93), he conjures up a scene in which his aged grandmother is abandoned and isolated in the woods, culminating with: "She stands—she sits—she staggers—she falls—she groans—she dies." Think of either a person you used to know or an older relative, close your eyes, and let yourself imagine that person doing something. Try to see it very clearly, like a movie in your head. Then describe the scene, using lots of details. If you want to, use both poetry and prose (as Douglass does).

CHAPTER 9

24. Douglass describes one of his masters, Captain Thomas Auld, as "cruel, but cowardly. He commanded without firmness." Think of someone you've known who was in a position of authority, such as a

teacher or gym coach, but who commanded no respect, was a push-over, etc. Describe that person and how other people reacted, and how it made you feel. You don't have to use the people's names.

CHAPTER 10

25. Sandy Jenkins, a fellow slave, gave Douglass a root as protection against harm. Among your family or friends, do you have objects or rituals to protect you from harm, or special home remedies to cure illness? For example, people used to think that a rabbit's foot, a horse-shoe, or a four-leaf clover brought good luck. Describe the special charms used in your family and the people who use them, and give an example of how one worked (or didn't).

26. Douglass' fistfight with Covey (pp. 112–113) ends in a draw, but in it Douglass wins a great moral victory. Describe a fight you've been in or seen, and tell not only what happened, but how it made you feel, and how it changed the way you looked at the other person or persons. Describe your relations with your opponent after the fight.

27. Just before making an escape attempt, Douglass and Sandy Jenkins have the same premonition at the same time, that someone has betrayed them. Have you ever had a premonition? Describe it and tell how it felt. Did it come true?

28. Slaves who tried to escape from slavery were called "runaway slaves." Did you ever run away from home, or even think about running away? If so, write about it and the dangers you felt, either real or imagined.

29. The description of Douglass' imagined flight (beginning on p. 122) has a Biblical sweep: "At every gate through which we were to pass, we saw a watchman . . . on every bridge a sentinel. . . . We were stung by scorpions, chased by wild beasts, bitten by snakes. . . ." Have you ever anticipated something so much that you experienced it before you actually did it? If so, write about it. Or try to imagine you are escaping through the wilderness, and write a poem or prose poem about what you experience, using vivid imagery.

30. Write about an experience you had of being caught doing something you weren't supposed to do (ch. 10, pp. 126–130).

CHAPTER 11

31. On p. 144, Douglass writes one big long sentence filled with dashes, which begins "Let him be a fugitive slave." Write one long sentence using lots of dashes. Keep it going and going. Don't worry about correct spelling or punctuation.

32. To conceal his identity, Douglass changes his name several times (pp. 146–147). Make up a new name for yourself and imagine that you are ten or twenty years older. Write about your future self.

Lynda Chin

DOUGLASS RESOURCES

SOURCE FOR MATERIALS

By far the single best source of books, videotapes, photos, posters, postcards, and other materials on Frederick Douglass is the Parks & History Association, P.O. Box 40060, Washington, D.C. 20016. The Parks & History Association oversees Cedar Hill, Douglass' home at 1411 W Street, S.E., in the Anacostia section of Washington, D.C., where the materials are available for sale. For phone orders, call (202) 472-3083 and ask for the Mail Order Dept. For information on visits to the site, call (202) 426-5961.

FOR YOUNGER READERS

Banta, Melissa. *Frederick Douglass: Voice of Liberty*. New York: Chelsea Juniors, 1993. A simplified biography for young people. Includes illustrations. 76 pp.

Bontemps, Arna. *Frederick Douglass: Slave, Fighter, Freeman*. New York: Knopf, 1959. A simplified version of Douglass' life, geared towards elementary school kids.

Cobblestone: *The History Magazine for Young People*. Special issue on "Frederick Douglass: Fighter for Freedom," Vol. 10, no. 2, February, 1989. Eleven easy and interesting articles on Douglass' life and achievements. Includes many great illustrations, a Douglass crossword puzzle, places to visit, and a bibliography. Cobblestone Publishing Co., 20 Grove Street, Peterborough, NH 03458. (603) 924-7209.

Douglass, Frederick. *Escape from Slavery*. New York: Knopf, 1994. McCurdy, Michael, ed. Excerpts from the *Narrative* tell the story of Douglass' youth. Includes good graphics by the editor.

- Douglass, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, adapted by Barbara Ritchie. New York: Crowell, 1966. Grades 5 and up. A condensation of Douglass' autobiography.
- Hamilton, Virginia. *Anthony Burns: The Defeat and Triumph of a Fugitive Slave*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988. Grades 5 and up. Burns escaped slavery 16 years after Douglass, but was caught. This is the story of his trial, return to his owner and ultimate freedom.
- McKissack, Patricia and Frederick. *Frederick Douglass, The Black Lion*. Chicago: Children's Press, 1987. A simplified retelling of Douglass' life in 136 small pages. Includes illustrations.
- Miller, Douglas T. *Frederick Douglass and the Fight for Freedom*. New York: Facts on File, 1993. 150 pages, very easy reading. Recommended for students (grades 7 and up). Includes an informative bibliography.
- Parsons, William, and Drew, Margaret. *The African Meeting House in Boston—A Sourcebook*. Boston: Museum of Afro-American History, 1988. Tells of a "free" black community living on the north slope of Beacon Hill with little money and minimal support from society.
- Russell, Sharman. *Frederick Douglass, Abolitionist Editor*. New York: Chelsea House, 1988. Grades 5-9. Details his life and involvement in abolitionism. Many photos and drawings.

STUDIES AND BIBLIOGRAPHIES

- Andrews, William L., ed. *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991. Excellent introduction by Andrews that discusses the responses to each of Douglass' autobiographies, as well as various criticisms of Douglass' works.
- Blight, David W. *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1989. "A major aim is to demonstrate how Douglass found a much firmer social identity in the Civil War . . . how he coped with the despair most blacks felt during the 1850s; how, through war propaganda

and recruitment of black soldiers, he released a deeply felt rage against slaveholders." An intellectual study.

Bontemps, Arna. *Free at Last: The Life of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1971. Reads like a novel. Includes illustrations. 300 pages.

Factor, Robert L. *The Black Response to America: Men, Ideals, and Organizations from Frederick Douglass to the NAACP*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1970. Over a hundred pages on Douglass' life. Discusses his relationship to the church, slavery, and politics.

Foner, Philip. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: Citadel, 1964. A long and detailed biography.

Foner, Philip, ed. *Frederick Douglass on Women's Rights*. Westport, Ct.: Greenwood, 1976. Excellent book on Douglass' support of women's rights.

Graham, Shirley. *There Once Was a Slave*. New York: Julian Messner, 1947. Like the Bontemps above, reads like a novel, with action and dialogue. 300 pp.

Huggins, Nathan I. *Slave and Citizen: The Life of Frederick Douglass*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1980. Quite readable, with helpful notes on the author's sources.

Martin, Waldo E., Jr. *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984. An intellectual biography. Full-scale study of the origins, contours, development, and significance of Douglass' thought. Scholarly.

McFeely, William. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: Norton, 1991. Probably the single best account of Douglass' personal and political life. Beautiful illustrations. Extensive bibliography.

Preston, Dickson J. *Young Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1980. Excellent, detailed, and accurate account of Douglass' times in Maryland.

Quarles, Benjamin. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: Atheneum, 1970. Especially good are the sections on Douglass' personal life and his relations with two white women (Julia Griffiths and Helen Pitts). The book does a good job of placing Douglass' career in the

context of the important events of which he was a part. Excellent bibliography, though needs to be updated.

Russell, Sharman. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: Chelsea House, 1988. A biography for young adults. Many good illustrations, 110 pp.

Sundquist, Eric, ed. *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*. Cambridge, England, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990. 13 essays that discuss Douglass' life and works. Very scholarly.

Voss, Frederick S. *Majestic in His Wrath: A Pictorial Life of Frederick Douglass*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995. An attractive collection of portraits, photographs, prints, and other documents, published in conjunction with the 1995 Douglass exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery.

Walker, Peter. *Moral Choices: Memory, Desire and Imagination in 19th-Century American Abolition*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1978. Good interpretation and criticism of biographies and Douglass' own autobiographies. Good bibliography.

Washington, Booker T. *Frederick Douglass*. London: G. W. Jacobs & Co., 1906. Deals more with history and issues than with the personal side of Douglass' life.

Wheat, Ellen Harkins. *Jacob Lawrence: The Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman Series of 1938-40*. Hampton, Va.: Hampton University Museum, 1991. A gorgeous book, with a series of paintings based on Douglass' life.

PLAYS

Branch, William. *In Splendid Error*. A play in three acts, performed at the Greenwich Mews Theatre on October 26, 1954.

Davis, Ossie. *Escape to Freedom*. Performed at the Performing Arts Repertory Theatre at Town Hall in New York on March 8, 1976. For younger audiences.

Hines, John. *The Boyhood Adventures of Frederick Douglass*. New York: New Dimensions, 1968. Good reading, excellent dialogue.

EDITIONS OF DOUGLASS' WRITINGS

(alphabetical by title)

Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies. Gates, Jr., Henry Louis, ed. New York: The Library of America, 1994. This is the first and only single-volume collection of all three of Douglass' autobiographies. Includes a chronology, notes for the general reader, an essay on textual history, and an index. A book that no library should be without.

My Bondage and My Freedom. Andrews, William L., ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987. Excellent introduction discusses the differences between *My Bondage* and the *Narrative*; outlines Douglass' psychological struggles after leaving his first home. Scholarly, but the introduction alone is worthwhile.

My Bondage and My Freedom. New York: Dover, 1969. Introduction by Philip S. Foner. Discusses Douglass' autobiographies. Appendix includes extracts from Douglass' speeches.

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Blight, David W., ed. Boston and New York: Bedford Books, 1993. This is part of the Bedford Books in American History series. An excellent volume. The introduction discusses the *Narrative* briefly, puts it in the context of the anti-slavery movement, discusses why the *Narrative* appealed to readers at that time, and discusses the importance of Douglass' portrayal of slaveholders and the theme of family separation. Part Two of the edition, "Selected Reviews, Documents, and Speeches," contains pieces written 1844-1852 and a chronology.

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Baker, Jr., Houston A., ed. New York: Penguin, 1992. Baker's introduction presents a good overview and discusses the importance of black scholars on the subject of slavery. Also describes the response to the autobiography when it came out and outlines Douglass' life. Includes a bibliography, William Lloyd Garrison's original preface, and the famous letter from Wendell Phillips. A handy, inexpensive, and attractive edition.

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. New York: Anchor Books, 1989. A no-frills, inexpensive reprint of the *Narrative*.

Note: Douglass' *Narrative* is included in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: New American Library, 1987.

OTHER MATERIALS

When the Lion Wrote History. For grades 7-12. This 90-minute documentary on the life of Douglass originally aired on PBS. \$49.95 from PBS Video, 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria, VA 22314-1698. Telephone (800) 424-7963. Teacher's guide \$5 from WETA Educational Outreach Dept., P.O. Box 2626, Washington, D.C. 20013.

Frederick Douglass, an American Life. For general audiences. A 30-minute video. \$19.95 plus shipping and handling. To order, call (202) 472-3083.

Frederick Douglass at Home. Washington, D.C.: Parks and History Association, 1995. A pretty little 40-page booklet showing the various rooms of Douglass' last home. To order, call (202) 472-3083.

Poster. "Majestic in His Wrath," a large black and white poster reproduction of a daguerrotype portrait of the young Douglass. \$3 plus shipping and handling. To order, call (202) 472-3083.

Poster. "Frederick Douglass." A striking 24 x 36" linocut by Stephen Alcorn. From an exhibition organized by 1199's Bread and Roses Cultural Project, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, and the Frederick Douglass Cultural Arts Center. Available through Knowledge Unlimited, (800) 356-2303. Ask for item #PO1994.

Poster. "Frederick Douglass." A 17 x 22" watercolor portrait of Douglass with a powerful quotation from him on the front and a biography on the back. \$14 plus \$4.95 shipping and handling. Notecards, postcards, and buttons also available. Art with Heart, PO Box 6367, Syracuse, NY 13217. (315) 474-1132.

BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

- 1818 Born in February on a farm near Easton, Maryland, in Talbot County, and named Frederick Bailey. Mother (Harriet) a black slave, his father a white man, rumored to be Aaron Anthony, his master.
- 1824 Works for Anthony on the Lloyd Plantation.
- 1825 Sees his mother for last time.
- 1826 Goes to Baltimore to work for Hugh Auld.
- 1827(?) Sophia Auld teaches him the alphabet. Learns to read and write.
- 1831(?) Religious conversion. Buys first book, *The Columbian Orator*.
- 1833 Sent to Saint Michael's in Talbot County to work for Thomas Auld.
- 1834 Works for "slave breaker" Edward Covey.
- 1835 Works as field hand for William Freeland.
- 1836 First escape plot fails. Jailed. Sent back to Hugh Auld in Baltimore.
- 1837 Meets Anna Murray, a free black woman.
- 1838 Escapes to New York. Marries Anna Murray. Moves to New Bedford, Mass. Changes name to Douglass.
- 1839 First child born.
- 1841 Invited to speak at American Anti-Slavery Society meeting. Goes on lecture tour. Moves to Lynn, Mass.
- 1845 *The Narrative* is published. Goes on tour of Great Britain.
- 1846 British admirers buy his freedom.
- 1847 Returns to U.S. Lectures. Moves to Rochester, N.Y. Begins publishing the anti-slavery newspaper, the *North Star*.
- 1848 Attends first women's rights convention.
- 1850 Active in the Underground Railroad.

- 1855 Publishes expanded autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.
- 1859 Goes to Canada and Great Britain to lecture.
- 1860 Returns to U.S.
- 1863-64 Meets with President Lincoln to plan for blacks during Civil War.
- 1866 Meets with President Jackson to discuss blacks' right to vote.
- 1870 Becomes corresponding editor of *The National Era*.
- 1874 Moves to Washington, D.C. Becomes president of Freedman's Savings and Trust Co.
- 1877 Is appointed U.S. Marshal of Washington, D.C.
- 1878 Purchases Cedar Hill, a 15-acre estate in the Anacostia area of Washington, D.C.
- 1881 *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* is published.
- 1882 Anna Murray dies.
- 1884 Marries Helen Pitts, a white woman.
- 1885-87 Travels with Helen to England, France, Italy, Egypt, and Greece.
- 1889 Goes to Haiti as American consul-general.
- 1891 Resigns post and returns to Washington. Writes and lectures.
- 1895 Dies February 20 at home. Buried in Mount Hope Cemetery, Rochester, N.Y.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

OPAL PALMER ADISA, Jamaican born, is a literary critic, writer, storyteller, and associate professor at California College of the Arts and Crafts. Her books include *Tamarind and Mango Women* (Sister Vision Press), *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories* (Kelsey Street Press), and *Pina, the Many-Eyed Fruit* (Julian Richards & Associates).

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MARTIN HABER is a writer and teacher at John Dewey High School in Brooklyn, New York. Through a grant from the Council for Basic Education, he is developing an interdisciplinary curriculum that takes an alternative approach to U.S. history.

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CHARLES KUNER has been teaching at Farragut Career Academy in Chicago since 1965, and has worked extensively with curriculum development in the social studies. He has a M.A.T. in U.S. history and a M.A. in urban sociology.

PETER E. MURPHY has published poems and essays in numerous journals, including *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *World Order*, and *The Shakespeare Quarterly*. He teaches English and creative writing at Atlantic City High School and Richard Stockton College in New Jersey.

RON PADGETT is a poet and translator, as well as T&W's publications director. His most recent books are *New & Selected Poems* (Godine) and *The Complete Poems of Blaise Cendrars* (University of California). He teaches imaginative writing at Columbia University.

LORENZO THOMAS is a poet and associate professor of English at the University of Houston-Downtown. His books of poems include *The Bathers* (Reed & Cannon) and *Chances Are Few* (Blue Wind Press). His work has appeared in *Post-Modern American Poetry* (Norton), *Up Late: American Poetry Since 1970* (4 Walls, 8 Windows), and *From the Far Side of the Century* (Sun & Moon).

ALFRED E. PRETTYMAN is the author of *U.S.: National Civics in a Mosaic Democracy* (McGraw-Hill, 1996) and co-author of "The History of African American Education" in the *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History* (Macmillan, 1995). He is assistant professor of social and behavioral sciences and humanities at Rockland Community College/State University of New York.

MEREDITH SUE WILLIS's most recent books are *Deep Revision* (T&W), a book about teaching writing, and *In the Mountains of America* (Mercury House), a collection of stories. She has taught writing from kindergarten through college level since 1970.

OTHER T&W BOOKS YOU MIGHT ENJOY

The Story in History: Writing Your Way into the American Experience by Margot Fortunato Galt. Combines imaginative writing and American history. "One of the best idea books for teachers I have ever read"—*Kliatt*.

Like It Was: A Complete Guide to Writing Oral History by Cynthia Stokes Brown. Clear, helpful advice on every step of the oral history process. "A solid, well-organized introduction, covering everything"—*Booklist*.

The Teachers & Writers Guide to Walt Whitman, edited by Ron Padgett. Practical ideas for fresh ways to read Whitman and to write poetry and prose inspired by him. For teachers K-college. "A very useful sourcebook"—*Kliatt*.

The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms, edited by Ron Padgett. This T&W bestseller includes 74 entries on traditional and modern poetic forms by 19 poet-teachers. "A treasure"—*Kliatt*. "The definitions not only inform, they often provoke and inspire. A small wonder!"—*Poetry Project Newsletter*. "An entertaining reference work"—*Teaching English in the Two-Year College*. "A solid beginning reference source"—*Choice*.

Educating the Imagination, Vols. 1 & 2, edited by Christopher Edgar and Ron Padgett. A big selection of the best articles from 17 years of *Teachers & Writers* magazine, with ideas and assignments for writing poetry, fiction, plays, history, folklore, parodies, and much more.

Old Faithful: 18 Writers Present Their Favorite Writing Assignments, edited by Christopher Edgar and Ron Padgett. A collection of sure-fire exercises in imaginative writing for all levels, by a group of veteran writing teachers.

Personal Fiction Writing by Meredith Sue Willis. A complete and practical guide for teachers of writing from elementary through college level. Contains more than 340 writing ideas. "A terrific resource for the classroom teacher as well as the novice writer"—*Harvard Educational Review*.

The List Poem: A Guide to Teaching & Writing Catalog Verse by Larry Fagin defines list poetry, traces its history, gives advice on teaching it, offers specific writing ideas, and presents more than 200 examples by children and adults. An *Instructor Poetry Pick*. "Outstanding"—*Kliatt*.

Poetry Everywhere: Teaching Poetry Writing in School and in the Community by Jack Collom & Sheryl Noethe. This big and "tremendously valuable resource work for teachers" (*Kliatt*) at all levels contains 60 writing exercises, extensive commentary, and 450 example poems.

The Whole Word Catalogue, Vols. 1 & 2. T&W's bestselling guides to teaching imaginative writing. "WWC 1 is probably the best practical guide for teachers who really want to stimulate their students to write"—*Learning*. "WWC 2 is excellent. . . . It makes available approaches to the teaching of writing not found in other programs"—*Language Arts*.



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THE TEACHERS & WRITERS GUIDE TO FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Edited by Wesley Brown

Designed for teachers from upper elementary through college level, *The T&W Guide to Frederick Douglass* takes a simple yet novel approach to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845). The authors of the essays collected here believe that students need to experience the *Narrative* as an aesthetic achievement as well as a socio-historical document. Only then can readers fully appreciate the impact and lasting influence of this great work of American literature.

The twelve essays in this book provide a variety of ways to get students engaged and inspired by the Douglass *Narrative*. Most of them emphasize writing—imaginative writing in particular—as a means for students to learn about Douglass, his times, and his legacy, as well as about themselves. The essays make it clear that Douglass' *Narrative* is as relevant today as it was in 1845.

Contributors include poets, fiction writers, and teachers from all over the country: Lorenzo Thomas, Margot Fortunato Galt, Marvin Hoffman, Douglas Day, Opal Palmer Adisa, Peter E. Murphy, Martin Haber, Charles Kuner, Joyce Dyer, Alfred E. Prettyman, Meredith Sue Willis, Jordan Davis, Christopher Edgar, Ron Padgett, and Lynda Chin. A special section provides a chronology of Douglass' life and a comprehensive listing of Douglass resources for teachers.

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